



“On the Fort”: The Fort Reno Community of Washington, DC, 1861–1951



Brian Taylor

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Presented to Rock Creek Park

By Brian Taylor

Interior Region 1—National Capital Area

Prepared under a cooperative agreement between
The Organization of American Historians and The National Park Service

November 2021

Cover: 3900 block of Davenport Street, early twentieth century. (Courtesy of National Park Service)

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Executive Summary

The Fort Reno neighborhood was a predominantly Black, working-class community that existed on the outskirts of Washington from, roughly, the late 1880s through the 1940s. Over the decades, members of the Fort Reno community supported families, followed professions, worshipped, sought recreation, improved their neighborhood's infrastructure, and fought for civil rights. Their neighborhood was destroyed by a conspiratorial group of real estate agents, civic leaders, and government officials who sought to ethnically cleanse the far northwest corner of Washington in which Reno stood; Reno residents fought their neighborhood's destruction, and they kept Reno's memory alive once they had moved elsewhere.

Major Findings

This report casts doubt, but does not disprove positively, the suggestion that the Fort Reno neighborhood can be traced to the Civil War period and makeshift dwellings built by Black laborers working at Fort Reno. Evidence uncovered suggests that Fort Reno took shape as an identifiably Black neighborhood in the late two decades of the nineteenth century. Fort Reno existed as a vibrant, working-class community. Reno-dwellers sought to secure for their neighborhood its fair share of municipal services and to communicate the respectability of its inhabitants through the Reno Citizens' Association. Reno residents took part in voluntary organizations, athletic clubs, and educational efforts, and they fought racism and segregation. Previous authors have identified the Fort Reno neighborhood as the victim of a set of conspirators motivated by racism and greed, and this study builds on that interpretation.

Methodology

This report relies on Union Army records from the Department of Washington, the records of the National Capital Park and Planning Commission, federal census returns, and newspaper items that appeared in Washington-area publications. This report also benefitted from sources shared with the author by scholars who have done work on this topic; these scholars are named in the "Acknowledgments" section as well as in relevant footnotes.

Results

The present work goes into greater depth about daily life in Fort Reno than have previous studies and covers in detail Reno residents' struggle to save Reno, as well as the campaign to destroy the neighborhood. It presents new information about the neighborhood and its inhabitants. This report will foster greater historical understanding of the Fort Reno community than has previously existed and will inspire productive conversations about race, space, and place.

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ABBREVIATIONS/ACRONYMS

CCLC: Chevy Chase Land Company

DC: District of Columbia

DOJ: Department of Justice

FOCA: Federation of Civic Associations

FCA: Friendship Citizens' Association

GAR: Grand Army of the Republic

NAACP: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

NCPPC: National Capital Parks & Planning Commission

NCSNC: National Committee on Segregation in the Nation's Capital

NSCA: Northwest Suburban Citizens' Association

RCA: Reno Citizens' Association

TCA: Tenleytown Citizens' Association

TJFC: Thomas J. Fisher Company

WREB: Washington Real Estate Board

WSP: WSP USA Solutions Inc.

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Brian Taylor
October 30, 2021

PREFACE

This project investigates the Civil War-era history of the Fort Reno installation that was a key component of the defenses of Washington. Its focus, though, is the community that was built on the remains of the old fort in the last decades of the nineteenth century. This report details the formation of the Fort Reno community, the contours of daily life in Reno, the religious, recreational, educational, associational, and political activities of Reno's residents, the campaign to destroy Reno, and Reno residents' fight to save their community. It also suggests avenues for further research and interpretation of the Reno community. Newspaper records constitute the core of the primary source base for this study; searches of newspaper databases yielded hundreds of articles containing information on the Reno community and its residents. Archival work with Union Army records and the records of the National Capital Park and Planning Commission likewise yielded key information regarding the formation and destruction of the Reno neighborhood. Census records proved crucial to in-depth portraits of families that called Reno home for decades and to developing a sense for how population demographics changed in Reno over the years. The COVID-19 pandemic limited the author's ability to visit several archives of interest to this project, but sources shared by other researchers (named in the Acknowledgments and in relevant footnotes) help compensate for the limitations imposed by pandemic-related closures.

INTRODUCTION

On July 1, 2002, the legendary punk band Fugazi played what is, to date, its last show in the United States, a free concert at Fort Reno Park in its hometown of Washington, DC. To some in attendance, Fort Reno Park, tucked amid the busy neighborhood of Tenleytown in Washington's Northwest quadrant, may have seemed an anomalous departure from its surroundings, an oasis of green among busy city streets, seemingly dropped from the sky. By 2002, free concerts at Fort Reno were a staple of the District's live music scene: they had started in 1968 as a way for local leaders to provide fun, outdoor entertainment for the city's youth in the wake of the rioting that had followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April of that year. Since then, the Fort Reno concert series has played host to numerous legendary local artists: Danny Gatton, Root Boy Slim, The Nighthawks, Rites of Spring, Nation of Ulysses, Jawbox, The Dismemberment Plan, Priests, and many more. On this night in July, photos indicate that thousands attended, Fugazi having built a massive following despite its strict do-it-yourself ethics and refusal to sign with a major label.¹

The band had released its final studio album, *The Argument*, in October of the previous year. Much of its setlist consisted of tracks from that record, including "Cashout," its second song. "Cashout" saw Fugazi frontman Ian MacKaye railing against gentrification and the destruction of local neighborhoods, accomplished by the unscrupulous practices of real estate agents, developers, and their allies in local government, who forced longtime community residents from their homes in the name of "progress": "The elected are such willing partners/Look who's buying all their tickets to the game/Development wants, development gets/It's official/Development wants this neighborhood gone/So the city just wants the same/Talking about process and dismissal/Forced removal of people on the corner/Shelter and location/Everybody wants somewhere."² Fugazi had also played "Cashout" at a Fort Reno show held the previous year, and music journalist Tom Breihan, in attendance at that 2001 show, described his "distinct memory" of MacKaye "looking around him, at the manicured lawns, and brick facades, and staring holes. . ." Breihan

¹ "A Brief Timeline of Fort Reno's Evolution," *Washingtonian*, accessed May 6, 2020, <http://www.washingtonian.com/2018/07/31/brief-timeline-fort-reno-summer-concert-series-evolution/>; "Fugazi Live Series: Washington, DC 7/1/2002," Dischord Records, accessed May 6, 2020, http://www.dischord.com/fugazi_live_series/washington-dc-usa-70102.

² "Fugazi – Cashout Lyrics," Genius, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://genius.com/Fugazi-cashout-lyrics>.

continued: “When MacKaye looked around at the expensive neighborhood that surrounded him, that was a theatrical gesture, and it communicated certain things that words never could. . . I can still remember getting chills.”³



Figure 1: Fugazi at Fort Reno in July 2002. (Photo courtesy of Glen E. Friedman)

Perhaps MacKaye gave a similar look to the crowd assembled at Fort Reno in July 2002. And perhaps some in the crowd that July night got chills because they knew that the lyrics to “Cashout” could have served as an epitaph for the neighborhood on whose remains the show took place. For decades, the Fort Reno neighborhood had existed as a vibrant community in which men and women had built homes, raised families, practiced trades, said prayers, pursued recreation, lived, and died, battling racial prejudice, structural inequality, and the hardships of everyday life all the while. This expanse of green had once been home to hundreds of families, many Black and some white, each with a story to tell. It is the purpose of the present study to tell the story of the Fort Reno community, a predominantly Black neighborhood that took shape in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Fort Reno weathered economic hardship, disenfranchisement, and segregation but fell in the early decades of the twentieth century to a powerful alliance of white businessmen and government officials determined to reclaim the area for the white neighborhoods of Washington’s Northwest quadrant and the Maryland suburbs.

³ Tom Breihan, “*The Argument Turns 20*,” *Stereogum*, accessed October 27, 2021, <https://www.stereogum.com/2164172/the-argument-turns-20/reviews/the-anniversary>.

This study is hardly the first to present the history of the Fort Reno neighborhood. Historical interest in Fort Reno revived in the 1970s, when Elizabeth Miller, a teacher at Woodrow Wilson High School, and a group of her students performed research on the old neighborhood. They interviewed former residents, produced multiple pamphlets focused on Fort Reno's history, and hosted Historic Reno Day in Fort Reno Park on August 18, 1977.⁴ Judith Beck Helm, in her 1981 history of Tenleytown, paid significant attention to Reno. Rather than a Black "enclave" or "ghetto" within Tenleytown, Helm described Reno as an interracial neighborhood that took root in the late 1800s and changed with the decades, as the original "small and cheaply constructed" dwellings, "aptly described as shacks," became interspersed with "more substantial houses."⁵ In Helm's presentation, Black and white Reno-dwellers lived harmoniously with one another, but Reno fell prey to the designs of local citizens' associations, who wanted to build parks, schools, and recreational facilities where Reno stood, "and accordingly to raise the property values of their increasingly affluent neighborhoods." Members of influential citizens' associations representing nearby white neighborhoods like Chevy Chase declined, she wrote, "to use their considerable influence to protect the interests of the black or the white people who had lived at Reno for two or three generations."⁶ Around the same time, Neil Heyden, a graduate student at American University, became interested in the neighborhood's history and produced a research paper on the topic. Heyden's account of the neighborhood's rise and fall was similar to Helm's, laying the blame for Reno's destruction at the feet of local citizens' associations and developers who coveted the land for their own purposes. Heyden clearly sympathized with Reno's residents and their struggle to keep their homes, but his telling of Reno's demise carried an air of inevitability: so many people wanted it gone that its destruction was simply bound to happen sooner or later.⁷

Two years later, archeologist Louana Lackey prepared a survey of Fort Reno Park which focused on the remains of the Fort Reno neighborhood. Reno was, she wrote, an "integrated working-class community" that "grew increasingly black" over the early decades of the twentieth century. The expansion of Washington, DC's city center toward the northwest reaches of the federal district, she wrote, spelled doom for the neighborhood, as residents of the "white, middle- to upper-class suburbs" that increasingly crowded Reno "combined a growing need for city services with an increasing distaste for the

⁴ Elizabeth Miller, "Report on the Neighborhood History Project," Summer 1977, courtesy of Alcione Amos, Anacostia Community Museum; Neighborhood Planning Council, "Origins I," Woodrow Wilson High School, February 1975, Tenley-Friendship Library, Special Collections, Tenleytown Historical Society Collection.

⁵ Judith Beck Helm, *Tenleytown: Country Village into City Neighborhood* (Washington, DC: Tennally Press, 1981), 174, 358.

⁶ Helm, *Tenleytown*, 479.

⁷ Neil E. Heyden, "The Fort Reno Community: The Conversion and Its Causes," Box 28, CWDW, Ft. Reno, Hist., General Hist., Research Papers, Box 28, Museum Resource Center, US National Park Service.

working-class black community in their midst.”⁸ In a research document prepared for Rock Creek Park in the summer of 2003, Irina Cortez used particularly striking language to describe the combination of forces that spelled the end of Fort Reno. Members of the Chevy Chase and Friendship Citizens’ Associations considered Fort Reno, “with its dirt paths and old homes,” to be an eyesore, and found in local government officials willing and well-placed allies who likewise sought to repurpose the ground on which Reno stood. Using condemnation (and the likelihood of receiving a lower price through condemnation proceedings than one might be able to bargain) as threats, these powerful interests killed “the sense of community amongst the residents of Reno . . . for the sake of ‘progress’ and capitalism.” A racist desire to rid the area of Reno’s Black residents worked alongside the desire to redevelop the land for profit. The result, wrote Cortez, was that “Tenleytown acquired a beautiful new park and new schools, but the cost . . . was the destruction of an entire community of people with hopes and dreams for themselves and their children.”⁹ Research performed by the Tenleytown Historical Society in recent years has reached a similar verdict, emphasizing the desire of local citizens’ associations for Reno’s destruction and local officials’ concurrence that the neighborhood’s existence blocked “progress” in the northwest corner of the District. In a community event entitled “RENO CITY—RAZED!” held at the restored Jesse Lee Reno School, and in accompanying physical and digital exhibits, the scholars of the Tenleytown Historical Society described the sad fate of the Reno community and the homes which had comprised it, which “though perhaps modest, were definitely NOT ‘tumbling down.’”¹⁰

In recent years, the Fort Reno community has also figured into historical work on other local Black communities, and on the history of Washington, DC’s African American community. The work of scholars David Kathan, Amy Rispin, and L. Paige Whitley on the nearby African American community located on River Road in Maryland has documented connections between African Americans living on River Road and those in Fort Reno, and linked Fort Reno’s destruction to “the growing desirability of this area for more upscale homes and neighborhoods”¹¹ David Rotenstein, in his work on the cemetery of the

⁸ Louana M. Lackey, “A Preliminary Archaeological and Historical Survey of a Portion of Fort Reno Park in Washington, DC prepared for The Department of General Services Government of the District of Columbia by Dr. Louana M. Lackey under Federal Antiquities Permit #83-DC-171,” 7–8, Potomac River Archaeological Survey, The American University, Washington, DC, June 1983, ROCR, CWDW, Ft. Reno, Cul. Resources, PTM: Tennis Court Project, Papers: Lackey, Louana M., Ph.D, Museum Resource Center, US National Park Service.

⁹ Irina Cortez, “History of an Age: From Fort Reno to Reno City, 1865–1940” (Washington: Rock Creek National Park, 2003), 26–30.

¹⁰ “Tenleytown Neighborhoods & Subdivisions —Reno City,” Tenleytown Historical Society, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://www.tenleytownhistoricalsociety.org/neighborhoods/reno-city.php>.

¹¹ Quotation appears in David Kathan, Amy Rispin and L. Paige Whitley, working paper entitled “The Forgotten African American Community of River Road,” April 3, 2017, 19. See also David Kathan, Amy Rispin and L. Paige Whitley, “Tracing a Bethesda, Maryland African American Community and Its Contested Cemetery,” *Washington History* 29, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 24–41.

Brothers and Sisters of Moses Lodge, which was located at one point in Fort Reno, wrote that Reno's disappearance gave substance to "urban legends speculating that there is a nefarious conspiracy, 'The Plan,' to displace African Americans in the District and convert black land and wealth into white wealth." Mincing no words, Rotenstein explained that, "White real estate speculators, many of them affiliated with the various firms involved in developing Chevy Chase, conspired with District leaders and Congress to displace African Americans in and around Reno."¹² Chris Myers Asch and George Derek Musgrove, in their 2017 history of Washington's Black community, offered a similar judgment. Asch and Musgrove described Reno as an "integrated community that thrived for decades," and wrote that Tenleytown and Reno were "exceptional" examples of integrated communities in an age that saw urban residential communities becoming increasingly segregated. Fort Reno's fate, they argued, was part of a "pattern of displacement that took root in the 1920s and flourished as housing segregation solidified in the 1930s and 1940s" which saw "federally supported local development [displace] poor people." In seeking Reno's destruction, white real estate developers and citizens' associations, working alongside like-minded federal officials, "ripped the social fabric of Fort Reno's black community irreparably" in service of creating a "forty-five-acre gem of greenery" which today resides within "a neighborhood studded with million-dollar homes."¹³

Neil Flanagan, an architect who lives and works in Washington, DC and who grew up in proximity to Reno, has produced the most detailed treatment of the Fort Reno neighborhood, its development, and its struggle to survive. Flanagan described the fight to save Fort Reno, a "thriving African-American community," as a "forgotten fight for civil rights in the middle of the creation of modern Washington," and the gentrification that has defined the District's development (of which Fort Reno was merely one example) as "a racially tinged contest over space that runs like a live wire through every interaction." In his thoroughly researched article, Flanagan highlighted the alliance between white real estate speculators, local politicians, and federal officials which previous scholars had also identified as the primary force behind Reno's destruction. Flanagan paid greater attention to the fight to save Reno than had any previous scholar, detailing the efforts of African American activists like James Neill, Thomas Walker, and Reno Citizens Association (RCA) Vice President Thornton Lewis, to protect and preserve the Fort Reno community. Flanagan,

¹² David Rotenstein, "The River Road Moses Cemetery: A Historic Preservation Evaluation," September 2018, 32.

¹³ Chris Myers Asch and Derek Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation's Capital* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 192, 257–258.

who is currently working on a book-length project which examines the Fort Reno community alongside urban development and planning in the federal district, titled his work “The Battle of Fort Reno.”¹⁴

The present study is indebted to the work performed by these scholars, and it seeks to supplement and update their work rather than dispute it. The present work does cast some doubt on the oft-made suggestion that there was a contraband camp located in the vicinity of Fort Reno, as well as the suggestion that African American laborers working in and around Reno began to build houses there during the wartime period itself. It is clear, though, that by the 1870s African Americans had settled in the neighborhood of the old fort, and that the community they built over the subsequent decades became a center of African American life in Washington. “Reno City” had definable boundaries in a real estate sense: Fessenden Street to the north, Howard Street to the east, Chesapeake Street to the south, and Belt Street to the west, to use these roads’ twentieth-century names.¹⁵ In reality, though, the boundaries of Fort Reno—the name the neighborhood’s residents preferred—were porous, and numerous families clearly were members of the Reno community despite living outside its boundaries, such as the family of Thornton Lewis, who for many decades lived on Wisconsin Avenue, south of the old fort. Reno’s destruction was clearly the result of a conspiracy, motivated by racism and a desire for profit, by the parties routinely identified by previous scholars discussing Reno: white real estate agents, local citizens’ associations, District politicians, and federal officials. Moreover, the struggle to save Reno, long ignored but resurrected by the work of Neil Flanagan, was indeed an important chapter in the struggle for civil rights and racial justice in the District of Columbia.

Rather than disputing the story about Reno that previous scholars have told, the present study devotes more sustained attention to the Fort Reno community than it has previously received. Previous works on Reno have fallen into two categories. The first consists of works primarily focused on other topics in which Reno has figured as a sub-topic, receiving some attention but lying outside the focus of inquiry. Works of this kind include Judith Beck Helm’s study of Tenleytown and David Rotenstein’s research on the Moses River Road Cemetery. The second category consists of studies focused on Reno itself; these have tended to be relatively brief, such as Irina Cortez’s paper on the neighborhood and the work of Neil Flanagan. It is the aim of the present study to provide a full-length look at Fort Reno by covering all phases of the neighborhood’s history, from its development through its destruction and beyond. This study focuses on the lives of the men, women, and children who lived in Fort Reno: the homes they built, the jobs they worked, the associations they joined, the causes they supported, and the fight they waged to keep their homes. Using Union Army correspondence, newspaper items, census forms,

¹⁴ Neil Flanagan, “The Battle of Fort Reno,” *Washington City Paper*, November 2, 2017. <http://washingtontcitypaper.com/article/188488/the-battle-of-fort-reno/>.

¹⁵ Lackey, “A Preliminary Archaeological and Historical Survey,” 5.

legal documents, Congressional records, and the work of previous scholars, this study provides sketches of some of the families and individuals who made their homes in Reno for decades, and who emerged as leaders of the community. It is the hope of the author of this study that this work will, alongside the forthcoming volume to be produced by Neil Flanagan, stand as a defining work on the Fort Reno community, and serve as a resource for historical interpretation of the neighborhood.

Some of the Black men and women who built Fort Reno were born enslaved and migrated to Washington during and after the Civil War. Some of them experienced the drama of Reconstruction in the federal district, when newly enfranchised Black voters combined with white Republicans in an alliance which dominated Washington politics for a brief period. They then saw their coalition undone by conservative whites who decided they would rather give up their own voting rights and accept commission rule than allow Black voters to have a say in District politics.¹⁶ The Republican Party transformed in the post-Civil War decades, abandoning its commitment to Black rights and adopting a business-first platform which prioritized economic development over justice. The Democratic Party proved itself a no more reliable ally during this period. The election of Progressive Democrat Woodrow Wilson in 1912 ushered in an era of increased segregation and racial tensions in Washington, and much of Reno's destruction was accomplished during the term of Franklin D. Roosevelt, who famously tailored many of his New Deal programs to exclude African Americans in hopes of gaining necessary votes from white supremacist Southern Democrats.¹⁷ The researcher perusing the files of the National Capital Parks and Planning Commission (NCPPC) will find the signatures of both Republican and Democratic presidents on the documents which sealed Fort Reno's fate. Turned out of their homes in the midst of the greatest economic crisis the world had seen, Fort Reno residents sought out new residences in the District, but they never forgot the Northwest neighborhood they had once called home, keeping touch with the people and institutions they had known during their time in Reno.

Through it all, the men and women of Fort Reno persevered, refusing to back down, undaunted by the powerful combination of economic and political interests that sought to wipe their homes off the map. In 1927, Samuel Hebron displayed his fierce attachment to Fort Reno. Hebron had once worked as a butler, but he had since secured a position with the federal government; along with his wife Clara, he had purchased a home on Donaldson Street in Fort Reno in 1916.¹⁸ At a 1927 hearing of the House of

¹⁶ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 146–168.

¹⁷ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 168, 220–222, 231–232; David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 342–343.

¹⁸ “Real Estate Transfers,” *Washington Herald*, January 1, 1916; “United States Census, 1910,” database with images, *Ancestry.com*, <http://ancestry.com> (Washington, DC: National Records and Archives Administration, n.d.); “United States Census, 1930,” database with images, *Ancestry.com*, <http://ancestry.com> (Washington, DC: National Records and Archives Administration, n.d.)

Representatives' subcommittee of the Committee on the District of Columbia, he went to toe-to-toe with Ulysses S. Grant III, the grandson of the former president. Hebron boldly told Grant, attending as the Director of the NCPPC, and the rest of those assembled that he "did not think they ought to come on the fort and run us people off who are trying to build respectable homes, and I feel that it is unjust and un-American."¹⁹ Hebron and his fellow Reno-dwellers lost their fight to keep their homes, but their community's life, and the campaign they waged to preserve it, comprise a crucial piece of Washington, DC history and tell an inspirational tale of courage, determination, and resistance.

The present Historic Resource Study recounts that history. Chapter One explores connections between the Fort Reno community and Black laborers who may have worked at the fort during the Civil War and also discusses the Fort Reno community's emergence in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Chapter Two details daily life in Fort Reno and profiles some of the people and organizations which defined the Fort Reno community during its heyday. Chapter Three deals with the clearing and conversion of Reno; it chronicles the movement to destroy the Fort Reno community, charts Reno residents' fight to save their beloved neighborhood, and examines the process of clearing Reno and the hardships it entailed for community residents. A brief concluding chapter discusses recent echoes of what Neil Flanagan has called "The Battle of Fort Reno," considers what remains today of the neighborhood, and suggests further avenues for research and historical interpretation.

¹⁹ *Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on the District of Columbia House of Representatives, Sixty-Ninth Congress, Second Session, Appointed to Investigate Affairs of the District of Columbia, Volume I* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Officer, 1927), 766.



Figure 2: 3900 block of Davenport Street, early twentieth century. (Courtesy of National Park Service)

CHAPTER ONE

FORT PENNSYLVANIA TO FORT RENO

In September 1900, the *Washington Post* published a survey of the remains of the defenses of Washington, the ring of forts and installations built around the nation's capital to protect it from Confederate invasion during the Civil War. One of the forts the *Post* discussed had commanded "the roads converging at Tennallytown," which were "the chief danger points" on the northwest side of the city. "Fort Pennsylvania, afterward Fort Reno," the *Post* declared, was "the largest and best equipped fortification of the whole chain" of citadels built on the outskirts of Washington. The newspaper further explained that, "Until a few years ago," when the District had put in a reservoir on the grounds of the old fort, its remains had been like an "old castle," and it had served as the "playground of the Tennallytown boys and the great 'view point' for all sight-seers from this city." During those days, "Let's go upon the fort," had been the rallying cry of local children, who had staged "sham battles" there and deemed it "the best place for 'I-spy' that could ever be found." "Now," the *Post* stated, "it is entirely given over to the negro quarter of Tennallytown."²⁰

During the last years of the nineteenth century, a new Black neighborhood took root on the remains of Fort Reno, as Black men and women sought land outside of the center of the federal district. In 1869, speculators subdivided the land on which the fort had stood and put it up for sale, and, by the 1890s, the neighborhood had begun to fill in. Black men and women purchased lots in this far-flung corner of Washington, DC and made their homes there, building a community which in the early decades of the twentieth century emerged as an important center of Black life in the District's Northwest quadrant. The present chapter focuses on the Civil War-era history of Fort Reno and the development of the neighborhood in the final decades of the nineteenth century.

²⁰ "Some Notable Forts—Defenses of Washington During the Civil War," *Washington Post*, September 9, 1900.

Fort Reno During the Civil War

The federal government seized the land on which Fort Reno was built in August of 1861, roughly four months after the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter had marked the beginning of the Civil War. Federal authorities quickly recognized the need to protect the federal district—surrounded as it was by Confederate Virginia and the dubiously loyal slave state of Maryland—and began to construct a ring of fortifications around the capital. At first, this defensive cordon consisted of a few isolated forts in Virginia but, after the Union defeat at Bull Run in July 1861, it became clear that a more robust system of fortifications was needed. Union officials saw the need to garrison the high ground near the village of Tenleytown, northwest of Washington. Tenleytown had grown up over the preceding decades as a convenient stopping point along the main route between Frederick, Maryland and Washington, DC. Constructing a fort at this spot—standing as it did 429 feet above sea level—was advantageous because it would offer a view of the northern and western approaches to the city, particularly along River Road, Rockville Road (today's Wisconsin Avenue) and Brookville Road (today's Belt Road), three major thoroughfares that converged at Tenleytown.²¹

Like most of the countryside surrounding Washington during this period, Tenleytown retained a rustic character, and the hills, woods, and grasslands surrounding the rural village were sparsely settled when hostilities began in 1861. Federal authorities, justifying their actions by pointing to the scale of the crisis posed by the Confederate rebellion, simply seized property belonging to landowners on the outskirts of the city they deemed to be of military value. The 61.31 acres on which Fort Reno stood had belonged to the family of Giles Dyer, a Treasury Department official and slaveowner who had purchased the land in 1853. Dyer died in 1856, leaving his widow Jane in control of the property. Writing in February 1866, Dyer recalled that when, at the war's commencement, her land "was taken by the Government . . . deeming it a military necessity," she had "resigned [herself] to the loss of a comfortable home."²² Dyer spent the war with family in Charles County, Maryland, while Union troops constructed on her property the most formidable fortress in the ring of defenses that encircled Washington. Construction was underway by August of 1861 and, within a few months, the fort—flanked by wooden barracks, mess houses, stables, kitchens, a hospital, and other outbuildings—stood as an imposing barrier to would-be attackers. To honor the Pennsylvania volunteers who had taken the lead role in building the fort, it was named Fort Pennsylvania, but its name was changed in 1863 to honor the Union general Jesse Lee Reno, killed at the Battle of South Mountain in

²¹ Helm, *Tenleytown*, 118–119; Flanagan, "Battle of Fort Reno;" Lackey, "A Preliminary Archaeological and Historical Survey," 1–2.

²² Jane Dyer to Montgomery C. Meigs, February 26, 1866, "Fort Reno, D.C. 1863—" Consolidated Correspondence File, 1794–1915, Box No. 892, RG 92, Officer of the Quartermaster General.

September 1862. Personnel stationed at the fort kept a watchful eye on the northwest approaches to the capital. Fort Reno proved sufficiently formidable that when in July of 1864 Jubal Early led a Confederate raid on Washington, DC, the Southern general was impressed by Reno's strong defenses and chose to direct his force's main effort against Fort Stevens, roughly three miles to the northeast.²³



Figure 3: 1862 map of Fort Pennsylvania. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

Black Laborers at Fort Reno

It has often been asserted and assumed that the origins of Fort Reno's Black community can be traced to the wartime period, when Black laborers who found work in and around the fort squatted on nearby land, building makeshift dwellings in the shadow of the fort. Judith Beck Helm made such a claim in her history of Tenleytown and, more recently, Chris Meyers Asch and Derek Musgrove have written that "freedmen . . . building the ring of forts that were to protect the city from a Confederate invasion" tended to settle near those forts, "establishing the roots of black communities that would flourish near Fort Reno, Fort

²³ Christina Correale to Bob Ford, July 26, 1995, ROCR, CWDW, Ft. Reno, Cul. Resources, PTM: Army "Formerly Used Defense Sites" (FUDS) Project—1994–1998, Box 27, Museum Resource Center, US National Park Service; Flanagan, "Battle of Fort Reno;" Helm, *Tenleytown*, 116, 154–155; Lackey, A Preliminary Archaeological and Historical Survey," 1–2; *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series 1, Volume 25, Part 2* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880–1901), 186.

DuPont, and other military installations into the twentieth century.”²⁴ Literature from the National Park Service, the federal agency that currently administers Fort Reno Park, has made similar claims: in 2005, Denise Meringolo wrote that Fort Reno had “attracted slaves in search of freedom and employment”; “during and after war,” she continued, “freedmen built homes near the fort.”²⁵ There may well be truth to this claim, but positive proof of its veracity remains elusive.

Upon the outbreak of hostilities, Black refugees flooded into Washington, DC, many fleeing rebel masters in Virginia and others coming from Maryland. This influx of Black residents only increased in the wake of Congress’s passage of an emancipation act for Washington, DC in April 1862. The federal government became the nation’s largest employer of formerly enslaved people and free Black people, and many found work at the forts that ringed the capital city. Communications between top Union officials within the Department of Washington confirm the ubiquity of Black laborers at forts, hospitals, barracks, and other military installations in and around Washington. In October 1862, Montgomery C. Meigs, Quartermaster General of the Union Army, wrote to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton to discuss “the wages of persons of African descent employed by the Quartermaster’s Department as teamsters, laborers & c.” Some of these Black laborers, Meigs explained, were “freemen,” but others were “freed by the emancipation of the slaves in the District of Columbia; many doubtless are fugitives from within the lines of rebellion, and entitled to their freedom under acts of Congress.” They had not been mustered or enrolled as regular soldiers. Rather, they had been “hired by special agreement or contract in each case as . . . employees of the Quartermaster’s Department upon such terms as were sufficient to secure their services.”²⁶ The following year, Elias Greene, the chief quartermaster within the military department of Washington, wrote to Meigs’ assistant Charles Thomas to discuss the “colored men engaged in the public service within the limits of the Department of Washington,” who were employed as “teamsters, and laborers, and receive the same pay as white men similarly employed . . .” Those employed as teamsters, Greene explained, lodged with their respective trains, whereas laborers lived in public quarters.²⁷ Nor was the federal government the only employer to hire Black men to perform military labor: federal contractors whose business involved work in and around Union Army installations also employed Black laborers, as did individual officers. As the scholars of the

²⁴ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 124; Helm, *Tenleytown*, 168.

²⁵ Denise Meringolo, “Historical Contexts for Fort Circle Parks: Suggested Framework for Curriculum Development and On-Site Education,” 2005, 4.

²⁶ Montgomery C. Meigs to Edwin Stanton, October 4, 1862, “Contrabands,” Consolidated Correspondence File, 1794–1915, Box 399, Entry 225, NM 81, RG 92.

²⁷ Elias Greene to Charles Thomas, December 17, 1863, “Contrabands,” Consolidated Correspondence File, 1794–1915, Box 399, Entry 225, NM 81, RG 92.

Freedmen and Southern Society Project have concluded, “Military labor was an important road to free labor for former slaves throughout the Union-occupied South, but nowhere was the road more heavily traveled than in the District of Columbia and northern Virginia.”²⁸

Given the extent to which the Union Army relied on Black laborers to staff the Washington defenses, it seems likely that Black laborers were a steady presence in and around Fort Reno during the Civil War; documentary proof of this point, however, has yet to be located. In fact, Union officials charged with staffing the defenses north of the Potomac River expressed frustration at their inability to procure Black laborers. In June 1862, William E. Merrill, a first lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers, wrote to James S. Wadsworth, military governor of the federal district, to “request a detail of ‘Contrabands’ for work on the Fortifications on the Maryland side of the Potomac.” Merrill’s use of the term “contrabands” referred to Union general Benjamin Butler’s spring 1861 rationale for allowing Union soldiers to refuse to return fugitive slaves who entered Union lines. Butler had designated these enslaved men and women as “contraband of war” lawfully seized; Congress and the War Department had since formalized and implemented this policy, and the term “contraband” was commonly used to describe Black men and women who came within Union lines.²⁹ Merrill explained that he needed 250 Black laborers to perform maintenance on the network of roads connecting the forts and on sod earth slopes in the vicinity. Merrill’s itemized request specifically asked for “20 negroes” for duty at Fort Pennsylvania and nearby Fort Gaines. This request went unfulfilled and, two months later, one of Merrill’s subordinates, William C. Gunnell, informed Lieutenant Colonel J.A. Haskin, the officer in charge of the defenses north of the Potomac, that Wadsworth had not provided the sought-after Black laborers. On the defenses south of the Potomac, “contrabands” had been available for “the entire season,” Gunnell complained bitterly, “but we have been unable to get any on this side.” Gunnell requested “3 details of 100 negroes each” for labor north of the Potomac, and though Haskin forwarded this request to Wadsworth with a covering letter of his own and endorsements from a bevy of high-ranking Union officials, including general-in-chief George McClellan, Wadsworth could only respond that he had “no unemployed contrabands” available.³⁰

²⁸ Scholars of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project quoted in Ira Berlin et al., eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867, Series 1, Volume 2: The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Upper South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 243–245, 248–249; Kate Masur, *An Example of the All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle for Equality in Washington, DC* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 23–24.

²⁹ James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861–1865* (W.W. Norton: New York, 2013), 138–145.

³⁰ “Document 52: Engineer in Charge of the Defenses of Washington to the Military Governor of the District of Columbia,” June 7, 1862, in Ira Berlin et al., eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867, Series 1, Volume 2: The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Upper South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 266–268.

Work got done in and around Fort Reno, of course, but the documentary evidence shows only that work was often done by members of the white regiments that garrisoned Fort Reno. For example, in December 1862 Colonel Lewis Morris, commander of the New York 7th Heavy Artillery, which manned Fort Reno for much of the war, issued an order involving road maintenance between the forts north of the Potomac. Morris ordered the garrisons of Forts Pennsylvania and Kearny to tend the roads between Tenleytown and Broad Branch and recommended that teams of twenty to twenty-five soldiers be assigned to the work.³¹ Similarly, in September of 1863 Morris ordered that 100 men of the 9th New York Artillery be detailed to work 10-hour days to “raise the road at Reno above high water.”³² To this point, no evidence of Black laborers being detailed for work specifically on Fort Reno has been uncovered; the evidence that has been located shows that white regiments encamped in and around the fort were expected to perform the maintenance necessary to keeping the fort in good working order.

Nevertheless, it remains likely that Black laborers employed by the Union Army, or by federal contractors or individual officers, were a regular presence in and around Fort Reno throughout much of the wartime period. The best evidence for this is simply the Union Army’s well-demonstrated dependence on Black labor in the Department of Washington, but scattered Union Army records suggest this to be the case as well. Evidence exists that commanders north of the Potomac continued to requisition Black laborers late into the war; in August 1864, the colonel commanding the 1st Brigade of Hardin’s Division, XXII Corps wrote the Assistant Adjutant General to request “a force of Two hundred (200) Negroes” as a “working party,” explaining that the “left of [the] line particularly in the neighborhood of Fort Sumner” needed attention. Although Fort Sumner, located to the west of Fort Reno in Bethesda, was the focus of this order, its wording was ambiguous enough to allow for the possibility that some of the work that needed to be done was in or around Fort Reno. The mundane tone of this order suggests that this request was not out of step with regular practice and, thus, the possibility that by 1864 Black laborers were a somewhat regular presence north of the Potomac, despite the frustration expressed by William Merrill and William Gunnell in 1862.³³

Moreover, an order issued by Lewis Morris in January 1863 suggests, but does not confirm, the presence of Black servants at Fort Reno. As an addendum to an order dealing with the transfer of a drummer from one regiment of the 7th New York Heavy Artillery to another, Morris instructed that, “Company commanders will not allow any Officers

³¹ Special Orders No. 73, December 14, 1862, Endorsements and Special Orders, 2nd Brigade Hardin’s Division, Department of Washington, Entry 6684; 6689; 6695, Vol. 178/379, 382, 383, 384, RG 393, Pt. 2.

³² Special Orders No. 71, September 5, 1863, Endorsements and Special Orders, 2nd Brigade Hardin’s Division, Department of Washington, Entry 6684; 6689; 6695, Vol. 178/379, 382, 383, 384, RG 393, Pt. 2.

³³ “Colonel Commanding” to A. Chandler, August 20, 1864, Letters Sent and Endorsements, 2nd Brigade, Hardin’s Division, Department of Washington, Entry 6664; 6665; 6667; 6675; 6687, Vol. 169/352, 353, 354 DW, RG 393, Pt. 2.

servants to wear the Letters, Cross Cannons or Figures” of the artillery branch of the US Army.³⁴ Morris’s order did not specify the race of the servants he wanted to bar from wearing the insignia of the artillery, and it may have simply emanated from Morris’ desire to distinguish between those enlisted in the US Army and those serving the army in support roles. The order might also, however, be seen as typical of the racism of the day, and of white Americans’ desire to keep the Civil War a white man’s war, even in the wake of the Emancipation Proclamation. As early as 1861, Black Northerners had taken to the pages of African American newspapers to criticize orders that forbade Black laborers serving in support functions from wearing military insignia, proving that some in the US Army were determined to keep Black laborers out of uniform.³⁵ Morris’s order certainly does not constitute undeniable proof that Black servants worked at Fort Reno, but it is suggestive of a focus on Black servants. To this point, no positive proof of the presence of Black laborers at Fort Reno during the Civil War has been found, and, at times, military authorities in charge of the defenses north of the Potomac were frustrated by their inability to requisition Black laborers. Nevertheless, circumstantial evidence suggests the presence of Black laborers in and around Reno, as does the general ubiquity of Black laborers in the region.

Surviving evidence does cast doubt, however, on the idea that a contraband camp existed in the vicinity of Fort Reno, or that Black laborers built a makeshift community near the fort during the wartime period. To this point, no correspondence emanating from the Department of Washington, or from Fort Reno itself, has been found that references the existence of a contraband camp in the vicinity of Fort Reno. In December 1863, in relation to Jane Dyer’s request that the Union Army pay her rent for the continued use of her land, E. E. Camp of the Quartermaster’s Department described to Montgomery C. Meigs the manner in which Dyer’s property had been occupied by federal troops: “Twenty acres by Fortifications, the remaining Fifty acres by barracks, Camps and as parade grounds.” Camp added that a two-story farm house on the grounds had served as the headquarters of the various units stationed on Dyer’s property, but he made no mention of a contraband camp,

³⁴ Special Orders No. 10, January 27, 1863, 7th New York Heavy Artillery, Regimental Consolidated Morning Reports, Letter and Order Book, E112-115, Pl-17, Vol 4 of 8, Book Records of Volunteer Union Organizations, RG 94, Records of the Adjutant General’s Office.

³⁵ A. F., untitled article, *Christian Recorder*, October 12, 1861; “L. [George Lawrence Jr.],” *Pine & Palm* October 5, 1861.

or of any dwellings built by Black laborers.³⁶ Camp might simply have ignored the presence of Black laborers nearby if they had built on property near Fort Reno that did not belong to Dyer; likewise, he may have only enumerated works built and used by regular troops, figuring that any makeshift dwellings constructed by Black laborers were not fit subjects for official military correspondence. The fact remains, though, that no other correspondence located in the preparation of this study suggests that a colony of Black laborers grew up in the vicinity of Reno during the wartime period; Union Army records from the Department of Washington do mention contraband camps elsewhere in the vicinity of the District, including Freedmen's Village and Mason's Island, with some frequency.

Moreover, Union officials received semi-regular complaints from nearby farmers and residents of Tenleytown about the depredations of soldiers on their property. In one representative piece of correspondence from September 1862, Charles R. Belt of Tenleytown complained to Colonel J.A. Haskin that troops stationed at Fort Pennsylvania were cutting timber on his property; in another, William H. Ernest implored Union officials to halt the "habitual trespasses [committed] upon his land."³⁷ Residents of Tenleytown and nearby farms clearly felt entitled to contact Union authorities about issues arising from the Union Army's presence in the area. Quite simply, given the racism of the time, it is unlikely that white residents in the area could have been aware that a colony of Black laborers known to be working in or around Fort Reno was squatting on nearby land and not written to Union officials to complain about it. This circumstantial analysis, combined with the lack of positive evidence of the presence of a contraband camp or settlement of Black laborers in Union Army records, casts some doubt on the proposition that the Black community of Fort Reno can trace its origins to the Civil War itself. Union Army records are voluminous, and it is certainly possible that evidence of such a colony exists, and simply has not yet been found; additionally, Black workers employed at other installations, such as Fort Albany near Arlington, did build makeshift settlements near the forts at which they were employed. It is simply not clear that such a settlement existed near Fort Reno.

³⁶ E. E. Camp to Montgomery C. Meigs, December 16, 1863, "Fort Reno, D.C. 1863—" Consolidated Correspondence File, 1794–1915, Box No. 892, RG 92, Officer of the Quartermaster General. An April 1866 newspaper article announcing the dismantling of Fort Reno enumerated the buildings that comprised the fort more specifically. That article listed, in addition to buildings like "Mess Houses," "Forage Sheds," and a "Saddler's Shop," three types of building for which a use was not specified: "twenty-seven buildings of log and stockade," "eight small buildings of various dimensions," and "eight small outbuildings of various dimensions." It is certainly possible that these buildings of undetermined purpose were built by Black laborers who worked in and around Fort Reno, or that they at least housed these workers. Nothing from this notice, however, suggests that conclusion. See "Large Sale of Government Buildings, Lumber, Timber &c., At the Dismantled Forts Around Washington, DC," *Evening Star*, April 12, 1866.

³⁷ Charles R. Belt to J.A. Haskin, September 16, 1862, Register of Letters Received, April 1861–December 1862, Volume 1, Department of Washington, Entry 5363; 5381, 1 of 19, RG 393, Pt. 1; Chief of Staff, Assistant Adjutant General to Martin Davis Hardin, March 15, 1865, Letters Sent and Index, Feb.–June 1865, Volume 22, Department of Washington, Entry 5375, RG 393, Pt. 1.

Indeed, if one looks closely at the language that twentieth-century Reno-dwellers and their allies used when they described their community's origins, one may be impressed by how careful they were to specify that their ancestors had acquired land near Reno in the immediate aftermath of the war, rather than during the conflict itself. Speaking to a congressional subcommittee in 1926, James Neill—not a Reno-dweller himself, but an ally of those who sought to save the neighborhood from destruction—dated the community to the Civil War's immediate aftermath. "Those homes," he said, "have been acquired by the colored people who have lived there since 1867 or 1868, when the subdivision was first made."³⁸ The following year, John F. Scott, who had by that point lived in Reno for nearly three decades, fixed the community's formation at the same point. He recounted a conversation he had heard between two white men decades before: "Twenty-eight years ago a couple of white gentlemen were down the road there. Evidently one of them was a stranger and the younger man was showing him the different parks. He says, 'Out there is Fort Reno. General Reno camped there during the Civil War. But,' he says, 'we came in there and squatted and have been there ever since and they can't get us away.' Now, they are trying to get us away." Now, they are trying to get us away." Scott's statement was difficult to parse, and surely suffered from the congressional stenographer's attempt to impose his or her own grammatical sensibilities upon it, but Scott seemed to be saying that whites were complaining that African Americans had moved in after the war and had resisted attempts to remove them. Scott mentioned the community's origins in a squatter's colony, but when pressed to fix a date on the community's formation, he stated that some of his neighbors' families had "been there since 1868 when it was first subdivided."³⁹

After the war, the buildings that had comprised Fort Reno were quickly disassembled and sold. The order to dismantle Reno was issued from the office of the general commanding the Department of Washington, Christopher C. Augur, in March 1866.⁴⁰ Plans to auction off the materials comprising the frame buildings left over from the fort were announced in April 1866, and all had been sold by the following month.⁴¹ The buildings were gone, but according to Judith Beck Helm, most of the old fort itself remained visible as late as 1892—indeed, "old Fort Reno" was enough of a presence on the landscape

³⁸ *Acquirement of Reno Subdivision*, 15.

³⁹ *Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on the District of Columbia House of Representatives, Sixty-Ninth Congress, Second Session, Appointed to Investigate Affairs of the District of Columbia, Volume I*, 766–767.

⁴⁰ Special Orders No. 54, March 15, 1866, "Fort Reno, D.C. 1863—" Consolidated Correspondence File, 1794–1915, Box No. 892, RG 92, Officer of the Quartermaster General.

⁴¹ Auction notice for Fort Reno, *Evening Star*, April 12, 1866; "The Dismantled Fort," *Evening Star*, May 3, 1866.

to be described in the present tense in an 1885 *Evening Star* item—and veterans who had served there sometimes returned to Tenleytown with their families to relive memories of their time at the fort.⁴²

“Reno City”

Although at the end of the war Jane C. Dyer had asked the federal government to purchase her land, the US Army returned it to her in January 1866.⁴³ Having lost most of their wealth in land, buildings, and enslaved people because of the war, the Dyers returned to their property and attempted to divide it among themselves. Finding in 1867 that Giles Dyer’s will was invalid, however, the Dyers decided to subdivide the property and hired a real estate firm by the name of Onion & Butts to handle the resulting sales.⁴⁴ Onion & Butts laid out streets and alleys, divided the land into lots, and called the new subdivision “Reno City.” On July 28, 1869, the firm began advertising “elegant building lots” in the “the most delightful building sites in the District of Columbia.” The firm did not envision the Reno subdivision as a haven for former slaves; rather, it marketed the Reno lots to government employees who might want to “[obtain] a country residence, or [make] a profitable investment.” As selling points, the real estate agents touted Reno’s elevation and the “most magnificent views” it afforded, asserting that, “For healthfulness and comfort as well as for grandness of scenery this location cannot be surpassed.”⁴⁵ The lots moved quickly, and, by early August, the partners had sold all the building lots and were putting one-half of the reserved lots up for sale as well, to comply with demand.⁴⁶ On August 19, the firm staged an auction and hired coaches to convey potential bidders from Seventh and E Streets out to the newly christened “Reno City.”⁴⁷ Onion & Butts dissolved their partnership the following month, and over the next several decades, trustees of the Dyer estate sold lots at

⁴² Helm, Tenleytown, 159; “Our Patch of Earth—The Geology of the District,” *Evening Star*, July 11, 1885.

⁴³ Jane Dyer to Montgomery C. Meigs, February 26, 1866, “Fort Reno, D.C. 1863–” Consolidated Correspondence File, 1794–1915, Box No. 892, RG 92, Officer of the Quartermaster General; Helm, *Tenleytown*, 168; Lackey, “A Preliminary Archaeological and Historical Survey,” 5.

⁴⁴ Flanagan, “Battle of Fort Reno,” Helm, *Tenleytown*, 168.

⁴⁵ Quotations appear in “Elegant Building Lots,” Onion & Butts advertisement, *National Republican*, August 2, 1869; “The Forts Near the City,” *National Republican*, August 11, 1869; Lackey, “A Preliminary Archaeological and Historical Survey,” 5; name “Reno City” used in “Reno City!” Onion & Butts advertisement, *Evening Star*, August 14, 1869.

⁴⁶ “Reno City,” *National Republican*, August 16, 1869.

⁴⁷ “The Auction Sale To-day at Reno City,” *National Republican*, August 19, 1869. That the Dyers had regained control of much of the Fort Reno area is supported by arrears of tax notices for numerous lots in Reno listed as belonging to Jane C. Dyer and J. Blake Dyer that ran in the *National Republican* in May 1876. See “Arrears of Taxes for Year Ending June 30, 1876,” *National Republican*, May 10, 1876.

auction, including land in the Onion & Butts subdivision.⁴⁸ Apparently one of the heirs of Giles Dyer, named Giles F. Dyer, had purchased the land back from the Onion & Butts firm by mid-1870, as an advertisement placed in the *Evening Star* in September 1870 announced that Dyer “had purchased Reno City . . . and perfected title to the same.” Dyer offered those who had purchased lots from Onion & Butts the chance “to complete their title” by visiting him at his office on 15th Street.⁴⁹



Figure 4: 1870 map of Reno Subdivision. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

⁴⁸ A. B. Butts and Newell F. Onion, “Notice,” *National Republican*, September 16, 1869; Thomas Dowling, “Trustee’s Sale of Valuable Property in the County of Washington, at Auction, *Evening Star*, September 9, 1870; Thomas Dowling & Co., “Trustees’ Sale of Lots Fronting on Sherman Street, “Reno,” Near Tennallytown,” *Evening Star*, May 17, 1895.

⁴⁹ “Lots at Reno for Sale,” *Evening Star*, September 24, 1870.

<p>ND RENT.</p> <p>HOUSES, 212 14th Q streets, and 399 14th and 15th sts. au 14-15</p> <p>ished ROOMS, suit- ers. The front room r's office for the last th street, between D au 14-15</p> <p>ON 8 STREET FOR story and basement street, between 12th l. Apply to WM. P. au 14-15</p> <p>HOUSE, 6 rooms, on 1 K sts. Apply next au 13-31</p> <p>ENT CONTAINING on G and I streets, etc. Apply 569 7th L. WESSER.</p> <p>HOUSES on 10th st. oms and hall. Small</p> <p>WHITNEY & CO. h st., bet. G and H.</p> <p>SE, No. 321 12th st., Lot 20 feet 4 inches 6 way from the new t. \$150 down and re-quire of JOSHUA h street, between G au 13-31</p> <p>brick HOUSES, of 3 ill, bath-room, water erylhing in thorough to occupancy. Loca, and Massachusetts</p> <p>WHITNEY & CO. that., bet. G and H.</p> <p>ISE, two and a half een 11th and 12th. In- and 14th. al 2-31</p> <p>TRACT OF LAND le for fruit, dairy, or ENJ. J. FENWICK. story. au 12-31</p> <p>HOUSE, furnished, niles from City P. O. hs. The owner would snitor at Washington and 10th sts al 2-31</p> <p>INICATING FUR-nd floor; together or adjoining. Family</p>	<p>FOR SALE AND RENT.</p> <p>Reno City!</p> <p>Reno City!</p> <p>Reno City!</p> <p>THE MOST DESIRABLE BUILDING SITES IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.</p> <p>\$12.50 EACH!</p> <p>\$12.50 EACH !!</p> <p>\$12.50 EACH !!!</p> <p>Having disposed of one-half the whole number of Lots in our subdivision of the Tract of Land known as the old site of FORT RENO, Tennallytown, D. C., we shall offer for sale, until WED</p>	<p>PE.</p> <p>MRS. E. SAWY, Clairvoyant M 416 E street north anco.</p> <p>\$1,500 TO L curity GALE, northeast c 11th st.</p> <p>DO NOT DESPA OLD Dr. DAR Fellows' Hall. He fail.</p> <p>JAMES HUG ATTORNEY AND Will practice in t ted States, the Cour the District of Colu Office, 240 Penna The business of t Peck, will be closed Office, 276 Pa. ave</p> <p>D. R. LEON 500 9th The most skillful tising physician for COMPLAINTS in t irregularities may r in him. He guaran are moderate, and p the Doctor.</p> <p>AN ESSAY ON A MANHOOD-B No. 141 W. Fayette free to any address.</p> <p>FRANCIS REGE LATE VTER U. Office at Nallor B tween 13 1/2 and 14th. References:—Maj. O. S. A., Major Ge Major Gen. Meigs. Brothers; Colonel J A., Captain J. Bu C. Gantier, Esq., C</p> <p>NATHANIEL W ATTOI HAS REMOVED my 24-1f</p> <p>DE BING'S! WC FUGA—For all ney Complaints, and Pamphlet of mavy. Scrofula, &c.</p>
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Figure 5: "Reno City!" advertisement, August 14, 1869, *Evening Star*. (Courtesy of Newspapers.com)

It is unclear exactly how quickly a substantial number of African Americans came to settle on the old Dyer tract. Neil Flanagan has found that, "Property sale records suggest that white speculators bought most of the lots" marketed by Onion & Butts, though some then constructed homes that they rented out to Black families.⁵⁰ Much of the land seems to have been unoccupied into the 1880s, as shown by real estate agent James B. Wimer's ability to buy 336 lots in 1882, and auctions of numerous lots like the one advertised by a

⁵⁰ Flanagan, "Battle of Fort Reno."

trustee of Charles Dyer's estate in 1885.⁵¹ There is no evidence from this period that real estate agents marketed Reno lots specifically to Black buyers. In a June 1886 advertisement, James B. Wimer, by then operating as a partner of the firm Cutter & Wimer, advertised the lots by touting their high elevation, proximity to recent purchases by President Grover Cleveland and Navy Secretary William Collins Whitney, and the "street railroad which will soon reach it."⁵² In June 1886, Cutter & Wimer claimed to have "a number of choice lots in this [subdivision] for sale to good parties," and boasted that, "The character of recent purchasers and inquiries now making here, indicate a most promising future for RENO." Given Wimer's turn of the century objection to the proposal to build a school for Black children in the neighborhood of Fort Reno (discussed in Chapter Two of this work), it seems certain that, when Wimer's firm spoke of "good parties," it was not envisioning Black buyers.⁵³

Judith Beck Helm has explained that African Americans moving to the Northwest reaches of the District went first to the Black communities along Broad Branch and River Roads, and then over to Reno; she was also able to identify several whites who bought property in the Reno subdivision. The most prominent white landholder in these early years was Frederick "Fritz" Bangerter, who began buying lots in Reno in 1869. Bangerter's Swiss Dairy supplied milk to the city, and in the early 1890s his cows could be seen grazing on the remains of Fort Reno. Bangerter built houses on the land he had purchased and rented them to Black families, and it may be that some of the Black families found living in the West Part of Washington in the 1870 census were living in the Fort Reno subdivision on land they had rented from Bangerter.⁵⁴

African American families began buying lots in the Reno subdivision in the nineteenth century, but it is not clear that they began doing so in 1869. The earliest recorded reference to a home in or near Fort Reno appeared in the *Evening Star* in February 1874. The *Star* ran a death notice for a Charles Williams, who died, according to the coroner, from a bout of epilepsy triggered by eating a lemon peel; Williams, whose race was not specified, was found in a "shanty near Fort Reno."⁵⁵ Several African American families that lived in Fort Reno in the twentieth century could be found living in the West Part of Washington in the 1870 census, or in Tenleytown in the 1880 census; but because census

⁵¹ Notice of land transfer, Giles F. Dyer to James B. Wimer, *The Critic*, November 7, 1882; John Patch, Announcement of auction in "subdivision of the estate of Charles Dyer," *Evening Star*, September 5, 1885.

⁵² Cutter & Wimer, "For Sale—At Reno," *Evening Star*, June 5, 1886.

⁵³ Cutter & Wimer, "For Sale—Houses," *Evening Star*, June 12, 1886.

⁵⁴ Helm, *Tenleytown*, 168, 176, 178; "United States Census, 1870," database with images, *Ancestry.com*, <http://ancestry.com> (Washington, DC: National Records and Archives Administration, n.d.).

⁵⁵ "Death from Eating Lemon Peel," *Evening Star*, February 11, 1874. It is likely that Williams was the same Charles Williams who census officials had found living in the West Part of Washington in 1870. Williams, who worked as a farmhand, was a thirty-year-old Black man who lived with his wife Mary. See United States Census, 1870.

officials did not list streets or addresses as part of the 1870 and 1880 censuses, or indicate whether families owned or rented their homes, it is hard to know where these families lived or what their residential status was. For instance, census officials found George and Arianna Dover, both of whom had been enslaved to local masters, living in the West Part of Washington in 1870. Arianna, whom records sometimes referred to as “Arry,” “Airy Ann,” or “Mary,” was the daughter of Bill Scotland, an enslaved man owned by John Patrick Whelan, an Irish immigrant who had settled near the Cabin John Bridge; Whelan had never learned to speak English, and Arianna’s father had served as his “slave interpreter,” learning to speak Gaelic to facilitate Whelan’s business dealings.⁵⁶ Arianna married George, who had been enslaved by the Peirce-Shoemaker family, and they chose to remain in the area in which they had been enslaved; in the 1900 census, Mary, her son Francis, and her daughter-in-law Catherine were found living on Kearny Street.⁵⁷

It is not known exactly how early the Dovers purchased their own land in Fort Reno. In January 1880, the *Evening Star* ran a notice of a land transfer between George and Arianna, referred to as “Mary,” so it seems likely that they had made their first purchase sometime in the previous decade; it is unclear, however, whether or not that purchase involved land located in the Onion & Butts subdivision on Fort Reno.⁵⁸ It may be that they rented from white landowners like the Bangerters for a time, accumulated savings, and then purchased when they were able. It may be, too, that they purchased a lot directly from Onion & Butts or as part of an estate sale without spending time as renters first, but proof of this has not been found to this point. George and Arianna’s son George met a tragic end, and a newspaper account of his murder confirms that the Dovers had established their home in Reno by 1886; on July 7, 1886, the *Evening Star* reported that Dover had been shot and killed by a man named George Dorsey, with whom he had quarreled at a Fourth of July picnic near Sligo, in Maryland. Dover lingered until July 6, when he “died . . . at his home at Reno.”⁵⁹ Arianna died at the family’s home on Kearny Street in 1906 at the age of ninety-one; Francis and Catherine Dover found that she had passed away in her chair when they returned home one evening.⁶⁰ Francis remained active in real estate dealing in Reno at least through the early 1910s; a 1911 item in the *Washington Herald* took note of an auction of Reno lots held by Thomas J. Owens & Sons that was interrupted by the “meanderings of [a] restless aeroplane,” and reported that Francis Dover had bought the lots for \$250.⁶¹

⁵⁶ “Suit in Ejectment—History of the Case Dates Back to the Year 1790,” *Evening Star*, May 5, 1906.

⁵⁷ Flanagan, “Battle of Fort Reno;” “United States Census, 1900,” database with images, *Ancestry.com*, <http://ancestry.com> (Washington, DC: National Records and Archives Administration, n.d.).

⁵⁸ Deeds in fee notice, G. F. Dover to Mary Dover, *Evening Star*, January 22, 1880.

⁵⁹ “Death of the Colored Man Who Was Shot at a Fourth of July Picnic,” *Evening Star*, July 7, 1886.

⁶⁰ “Found Dead in Her Chair,” *Evening Star*, September 1, 1906.

⁶¹ “Aeroplane vs. Auctioneer: Former Wins in a Walk,” *Washington Herald*, August 12, 1911.

The Prather and Neale families present similar cases to the Dovers. George and Harriet Ann Prather first appeared in the census for Northwest Washington in 1870—referred to as “Prater”—with their five children. By 1876, it seems, the Prathers had purchased land in Reno, as arrears of tax notices listed a “Prather’s subdivision of Reno.”⁶² Altogether, the Prathers had at least nine children, two of whom, Frank Prather and Lillie Neale, could be found living in Fort Reno as late as 1920.⁶³ Lillie married Alfred Neale, another longtime resident of the area. Alfred was the son of Richard and Margaret Neale, who had appeared in the Tenleytown census in 1880, and he appeared on a list of graduates from the African American schools of Washington County in 1875.⁶⁴ Eventually, Alfred purchased a home on Davenport Street; he died in 1915, and Lillian and her brother Frank were found living on Davenport Street in the 1920 census.⁶⁵

Lillian and Alfred took active roles in the RCA, and the Prathers and Neales were long-term residents of the area who were members of the Fort Reno community. It seems fairly clear that the Prathers had purchased land in the Reno subdivision by 1876, but it is not clear whether, when his family turned up in the 1880 census, Alfred was living within the Reno subdivision or somewhere nearby. Records of property transfers between Alfred and Richard Neale in the Onion & Butts subdivision prove that by the early 1890s, the Neales owned property in Fort Reno. It is unknown how early the Neales purchased this property, and whether they were property owners when they appeared in the 1880 census.⁶⁶ Census data shows that families moved from house to house within the Fort Reno area with some regularity, renting on one street and then purchasing on another, and it is certainly possible that families like the Dovers, Prathers and Neales did the same during the early years of the Reno subdivision.

In his study of the nearby African American community on River Road, David Rotenstein found evidence of “tremendous mobility” during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including movement within neighborhoods and from one community

⁶² The taxes in arrears did not belong to the Prathers, but to a man named John W. Donn. See “Arrears of Taxes for Year Ending June 30, 1876,” *National Republican*, May 10, 1876. The Prathers also purchased land from the Dyer family in 1885. See Notice of land sale, Giles F. Dyer to Harriet Ann Prather, *National Republican*, June 29, 1885.

⁶³ United States Census, 1870; “United States Census, 1880,” database with images, *Ancestry.com*, <http://ancestry.com> (Washington, DC: National Records and Archives Administration, n.d.); “United States Census, 1920,” database with images, *Ancestry.com*, <http://ancestry.com> (Washington, DC: National Records and Archives Administration, n.d.).

⁶⁴ “The County Public Schools,” *Evening Star*, June 24, 1875; United States Census, 1880.

⁶⁵ United States Census, 1910, database with images, *Ancestry.com*, <http://ancestry.com> (Washington, DC: National Records and Archives Administration, n.d.); United States Census, 1920, database with images, *Ancestry.com*, <http://ancestry.com> (Washington, DC: National Records and Archives Administration, n.d.).

⁶⁶ Notice of land transfer, Richard A. Neal to A. L. Neal, *Evening Star*, September 9, 1892; “Real Estate,” *Evening Star*, April 7, 1894.

to another.⁶⁷ Some Black families in the area lived nearby before moving to Fort Reno in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. The family of Aaron and Helen Dixon, for example, lived on Broad Branch Road before moving to Fort Reno around the turn of the twentieth century.⁶⁸ Likewise, Jeremiah “Jerry” Botts and his wife Cora first made their home near River Road before moving to Fort Reno. They made their first purchase of Reno land in 1887, and by the turn of the twentieth century census officials found them living on Sherman Street.⁶⁹ Scattered documentation suggests that, in terms of public perception at least, Fort Reno as a distinct neighborhood, and in particular as an African American neighborhood, took shape gradually in the latter decades of the nineteenth century.

The Coalescence of Fort Reno’s Black Community

A notice that appeared in the local newspaper *The Critic* in July 1886 suggested that, although Onion & Butts had declared “Reno City” open for business as far back as 1869, and city directories from 1872 through 1906 had listed residents as living in “Reno City,” it was still seen as a new community. “A new suburb, called ‘Garfield,’ part of the old Chichester estate, came into the market, as did ‘Reno,’ which is on the Giles Dyer land, near Tennallytown,” announced *The Critic*’s real estate section.⁷⁰ Judging by the frequency of Reno’s appearance in the land transfers sections of local newspapers, Reno land sales gained momentum in 1887, having lain fairly dormant through the early part of the decade. Some Black Reno-dwellers purchased land in Reno at this time; as noted above, Jerry and Cora Botts bought land in Reno in that year, as did Nelson Vale.⁷¹ Amanda Banks, an African American woman who worked as a servant and was found living on Prospect Street in 1900, had purchased her lot in Reno in 1889; Walter Carter, who would one day take an active role in the RCA, purchased lots in Reno the following year.⁷² Over the course of the 1890s, Rosa Campbell, Alfred Neale, grocer Jesse Smith and his wife Agnes, David Banks, and Isaiah Scott, all of whom were African American residents of Reno, purchased land in

⁶⁷ Rotenstein, “The River Road Moses Cemetery,” 47.

⁶⁸ “Interview at Rock Creek Baptist Church, August 2, 1977,” 3. Courtesy of Alcione Amos, Anacostia Community Museum. Original located at Washington DC Historical Society. United States Census, 1900, database with images, *Ancestry.com*, <http://ancestry.com> (Washington, DC: National Records and Archives Administration, n.d.); United States Census, 1910.

⁶⁹ Notice of land transfer, Elizabeth A. Wells to Cora Botts, *Evening Star*, May 6, 1887; Rotenstein, “The River Road Moses Cemetery,” 62; United States Census, 1900.

⁷⁰ Untitled real estate notice, *Critic*, July 10, 1886.

⁷¹ Notice of land transfer, G. F. Dyer to “Nelson Vales,” July 9, 1887, *Evening Star*.

⁷² Notice of land transfer, James B. Wimer to “Amanda Bank,” September 4, 1889; Notice of land transfer, E. Rhodes to Walter Carter, May 31, 1890.

the subdivision.⁷³ The impression one gets from following the notices of land auctions, purchases, and advertisements that appeared in Washington newspapers was that the neighborhood grew in fits and starts between the last two decades of the 1800s and first decade of the 1900s. In 1907, James B. Wimer was still advertising the availability of 185 lots—“best speculation in the District,” he claimed—and enough land in Reno remained vacant into the 1910s that purchases of as many as ninety lots by a single buyer remained possible.⁷⁴ Indeed, the irregular growth of the subdivision would one day be used as justification for its removal: in January 1924, the DC Commissioners explained to the Senate that Fort Reno, which they sought to acquire and replace with public schools, a park, and a playground, had “[grown] up in a haphazard manner.”⁷⁵

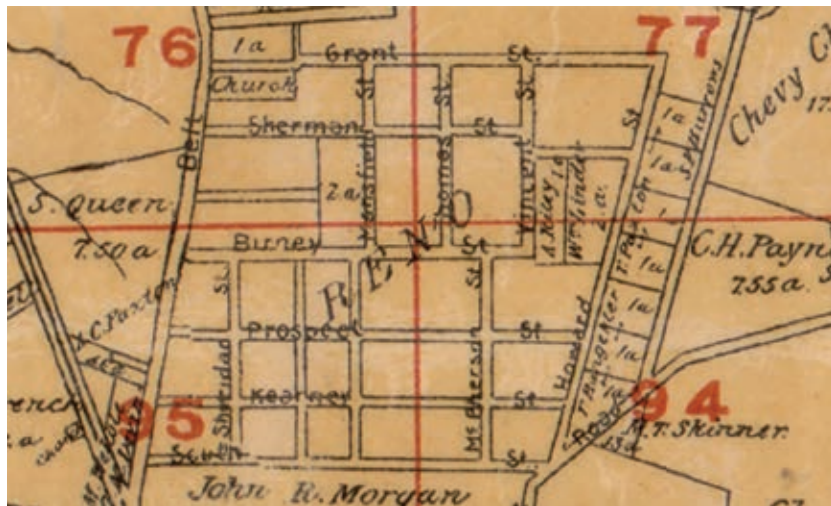


Figure 6: Washington County Plat Map of 1892 showing Fort Reno neighborhood. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

Landlords, who intended to build multiple homes and rent them out, also bought up Reno land; in June 1891, for instance, the *Evening Star* recorded that permits had been issued to a Mrs. E. H. Magruder for the construction of seven frame houses on three Reno lots, and, later in the same year, John M. Buckley secured permits for the construction of four two-story homes on Kearny Street and two additional two-story dwellings on the corner of Thomas and Birney Streets; his holdings in Reno were eventually known as

⁷³ Notice of land transfer, James B. [Wimer] et ux. to Rosa Campbell, *Evening Star*, May 31, 1891; Notice of land transfer, Richard A. Neal to A. L. Neal, *Evening Star*, September 9, 1892; Notice of land transfer, W. T. Jenkins and wife to Jesse and Agnes Smith, *Evening Star*, February 1, 1893; Notice of land transfer, Harry M. Martin to David Banks, *Evening Star*, May 22, 1895; Notice of land transfer, Frances Diggs et vir. to Isaiah Scott, *Evening Star*, July 1, 1899.

⁷⁴ Wimer quoted in “For Sale—Lots,” *Evening Star*, August 30, 1907; “Realty Trading Dull, But Rising,” *Washington Herald*, July 12, 1914.

⁷⁵ Plan Land Purchase Abutting Reservoir, *Evening Star*, January 29, 1924.

“Buckley Row.”⁷⁶ While some Black Reno-dwellers owned their own homes, others rented from landlords like Magruder and Buckley who worked busily to expand their holdings during this period. The pace and quality of construction in Reno during the early 1890s occasioned comment from the local press, and Reno seemed to develop something of a local reputation. In August 1892, the *Evening Star* reported that “in the subdivision of Reno, plans for houses of a pretty design are now being made by architects of taste,” and added that thirteen cottages had been built in Reno in the previous two months alone; an item in the *Star* published the following year referred to the subdivision as “The Palisades of the Potomac.”⁷⁷ Some houses in Reno had yards with gardens and fruit trees, but others were packed tight together, and a single fire could damage multiple dwellings, as did a 1910 fire that destroyed one house and damaged four others, compelling the residents of these homes to pile their belongings outside in the snow to save them from destruction.⁷⁸ Although it is evident that Reno was developing as a neighborhood in the last decades of the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth century, the *Evening Star* could still claim in 1913 that, while “some of Fort Reno ha[d] been thinly built over . . . much of [the fort’s] site [was] commons.”⁷⁹

In the 1890s, Fort Reno was characterized as an expanding, interracial community. An August 1894 piece in the *Evening Star* claimed that thirty “residents of the vicinity of Fort Reno,” “whites and colored,” had been stricken with typhoid fever and “lesser fevers.” The *Star* reporter who published this piece had consulted with a “doctor of prominence in Tenleytown,” and he asserted that, “The population of this section has so increased of late that the refuse matter thrown away has become formidable in its effect upon the people.”⁸⁰ An 1894 map showed sixty houses, some white-owned, in Fort Reno, and an 1892 police census counted 211 African Americans living in the Tenleytown area; this was a significant figure, but greater numbers of African Americans would call Reno home during the early decades of the twentieth century.⁸¹

In the research performed for this study, the earliest located references to Fort Reno as a distinct African American community came in the 1890s and early 1900s. An 1893 notice in the *Evening Star* detailed white Tenleytown residents’ complaints regarding the

⁷⁶ “Affairs in Georgetown,” *Evening Star*, December 7, 1903; “Building Permits,” *Evening Star*, June 7, 1891; “Building Fairly Active Judging by the Number of Permits Taken Out,” *Evening Star*, August 9, 1891; “Building Permits,” *Evening Star*, November 29, 1891. Magruder built another six frame houses in Reno in 1894. See “About Georgetown,” *Evening Star*, August 30, 1894.

⁷⁷ “About Tenleytown,” *Evening Star*, August 27, 1892; “The Fort Reno Stand Pipe,” *Evening Star*, March 16, 1893.

⁷⁸ “Row of Houses Afire; Loss Placed at \$1,800,” *Evening Star*, December 6, 1910.

⁷⁹ “Washington’s Civil War Defenses,” *Evening Star*, January 12, 1913.

⁸⁰ “Affairs in Georgetown,” *Evening Star*, August 24, 1894.

⁸¹ Helm, *Tenleytown*, 173.

allegedly raucous behavior of “the colored people who weekly hold picnics on Fort Reno.”⁸² By 1901, local residents were aware of Fort Reno as the center of the local Black population; in that year, the Tenleytown Citizens Association, advocating Fort Reno’s conversion into parkland, referred to the “colored settlement on Reno, where the houses are small and detrimental to surrounding interests.”⁸³ The year before, the *Washington Post* piece quoted at the start of this chapter, which lamented that the former playground for Tenleytown’s youth had become the home of the neighborhood’s Black population, implied that the change had taken place relatively recently.⁸⁴ As a sign that Reno had taken on a working-class character that he had not anticipated, the terms in which James B. Wimer described Reno in his real estate advertisements had changed by the turn of the twentieth century. Where earlier he touted the neighborhood’s proximity to land purchased by the president and prominent federal officials, by November 1900 he was offering lots that would be “[e]xcellent” for “a builder who would put up inexpensive homes.”⁸⁵

Washington’s Black population grew significantly in the last decades of the nineteenth century. As Reconstruction collapsed across the South, and Jim Crow and lynch law proliferated, the federal district remained an attractive destination for Black migrants. African Americans remembered the wartime alliance they had forged with the federal government and understood the relationship between federal power and protection of Black rights; they also valued the educational, social, and economic opportunities life in the District provided. Washington’s Black population grew by nearly 75 percent between 1870 and 1890, and by the last decade of the nineteenth century more than 75,000 African Americans called the District home, accounting for roughly one-third of its total population.⁸⁶ Most Black migrants to the District did not seek out rural destinations such as Fort Reno, preferring to settle closer to the city center. “Most African-Americans migrating to DC,” Neil Flanagan has written, “were not so interested in living in a village, preferring more central neighborhoods like Shaw and Foggy Bottom, where there was more work.”⁸⁷ Some of those African Americans who did seek out Reno may have done so because they had worked in or around the fort during the Civil War. Nelson Vale, who purchased land from the Dyer family in 1887 and was living in Fort Reno at the turn of the twentieth century, had worked for the Union Army during the Civil War as a teamster, though not in

⁸² “Disorderly Conduct Complained Of,” *Evening Star*, July 27, 1893.

⁸³ “A Proposition to Purchase Land near Fort Reno Reservoir,” *Evening Star*, May 24, 1901.

⁸⁴ “Some Notable Forts—Defenses of Washington During the Civil War,” *Washington Post*, September 9, 1900.

⁸⁵ J.B. Wimer, “For Sale—Reno Lots,” *Evening Star*, November 8, 1900.

⁸⁶ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 169–170.

⁸⁷ Flanagan, “Battle of Fort Reno.”

Washington. He had accompanied General William Tecumseh Sherman on his March to the Sea in late 1864, and in 1900 “pointed with pride to his trip through Georgia with Gen. Sherman.”⁸⁸

Whether they had worked for the Union Army or not, when they chose to make their homes on or around Fort Reno, Black migrants conformed to an urban settlement pattern seen in cities across the post-Civil War South. As slavery collapsed, geographer John Kellogg has explained, freed men and women began moving from the countryside to Southern towns and cities, seeking better wages and educational opportunities, as well as a strength in numbers that would protect them from hostile and potentially violent whites. Lots near city centers were prohibitively expensive, and existing Black neighborhoods did not have space for all the incoming migrants. Before the advent of modern transportation facilities that eased passage between “peripheral areas” like Fort Reno and the city center, “commuting suburbs” like Reno were among the “least desirable . . . residential locations” in Southern cities. As whites were generally not interested in living in these far-flung neighborhoods, landowning families like the Dyers found profit where they could, subdividing their land and selling it to Black migrants.⁸⁹

Although the lack of street and address information in the 1870 and 1880 censuses, and the lack of data from the 1890 census—most of which was destroyed by fire—make it difficult to know exactly how many African Americans were living in the Reno subdivision in the 1880s and 1890s, it is obvious that Reno’s Black population was growing around the turn of the century; a local police census in 1897 found 369 African Americans living in the Tenleytown area, an increase of 74 percent from the figure reported five years previously.⁹⁰ One way to chart Reno’s growth as an African American neighborhood is by looking at census figures from the twentieth century, when census officials listed streets and house numbers and, thus, population figures for Fort Reno are possible to tally. Such an exercise has its flaws, admittedly. While the Reno subdivision had boundaries, membership in the Fort Reno community was not limited to those who lived within the confines of the subdivision. Any attempt to define Fort Reno in geographic terms will inevitably leave out families that clearly belonged to the Fort Reno community, such as Thornton Lewis’s family, which lived for decades on Wisconsin Avenue, and the Masterson family on 41st Street, one of numerous Black families who lived on that nearby street during the first

⁸⁸ “Vale Hanged Today,” *Evening Star*, July 6, 1900.

⁸⁹ John Kellogg, “Negro Urban Clusters in the Postbellum South,” *Geographical Review*, *Geographical Review* 67, no. 3, July 1977, 312–313.

⁹⁰ Helm, *Tenleytown*, 173. This police census was focused on Tenleytown in general and not limited to the Reno subdivision, thus the difference between this figure and the figures cited for the subdivision below.

decades of the twentieth century.⁹¹ Additionally, even in the twentieth-century censuses, many houses were listed as un-numbered, so there is still some amount of educated guesswork involved in determining who actually lived within the boundaries of the subdivision. Even though such an exercise will inevitably leave out some who belonged to the Fort Reno community despite their residence outside it, as well as likely include some few who may have lived outside its bounds, it remains worthwhile. It allows us to see how percentages of white and Black populations living in the area changed over time, and thus gives us a sense of Fort Reno's evolution as a center of Black population in the Northwest reaches of Washington.

From the 1900 census through the 1930 census, African Americans always outnumbered whites within the boundaries of the Reno subdivision.⁹² In 1900, 290 blacks and 248 whites lived there; the subdivision was 53 percent Black and 47 percent white. In 1910, when census officials found 334 blacks and 324 whites living in Fort Reno, the subdivision was split almost evenly. In that year, African Americans in Reno represented only 50.3 percent of those living in the subdivision, a low for the four censuses studied in this manner. By 1920, the number of African Americans living in Fort Reno had increased slightly to 341, but the number of whites had decreased dramatically, down to 219. In that year's census, the subdivision was 60.8 percent African American and 39.2 percent white. Finally, in 1930, Reno's Black population had grown to 384 people, but its white population had also grown, as 291 whites now lived in the subdivision, making it 56 percent African American and 44 percent white. These statistics do not account for the fact that whites in the Fort Reno subdivision were clustered on its outer streets, especially Chesapeake Street to the south and Belt Road to the west. African Americans were concentrated on the interior of the subdivision, especially on Davenport, Donaldson, and Dennison Streets. Thus, one moving from the outer limits of the subdivision to the interior would have been conscious of entering a center of African American population. From 1900 through 1930, Fort Reno's Black population grew steadily, and even if the Black population within the bounds of the subdivision never exceeded more than roughly 60 percent of its total population, when Black families living on 41st Street, as well as families like that of Thornton Lewis, are taken into account, it is clear that there were hundreds of African Americans in this northwest corner of the District who looked to Fort Reno as the center of their

⁹¹ Although 41st Street lay outside the technical boundaries of the Reno subdivision, and lies just west of the present-day park, Black families living there were clearly considered part of the Fort Reno community, and this reality was reflected by newspaper coverage of the area. For instance, in June 1905, the *Washington Post* took note of a domestic dispute in the home of Perry and Mamie Moten, a Black couple who lived on "Forty-First Street, Fort Reno." See "Man and Wife Both Locked Up," *Washington Post*, June 19, 1905.

⁹² For the purposes of this exercise, Fort Reno was defined by the boundaries of the Reno subdivision enumerated in the Introduction of this study: Fessenden Street to the north, Howard Street to the east, Chesapeake Street to the south and Belt Street to the west.

community. Indeed, when funeral services for the executed murderer Nelson Vale, a longtime Reno resident and member of Rock Creek Baptist Church, were held in his former Reno home in July 1900, the *Evening Star* estimated that 1,000 mourners paid their respects.⁹³

Indeed, by the early decades of the twentieth century, hundreds of Black Washingtonians called Fort Reno home, and many who did not live within Reno proper saw it as a focal point of Black life in the far northwest reaches of the District. The following chapter will detail the rhythms of daily life in Reno, the institutions that served Black Reno-dwellers, and the connections that formed between the Fort Reno community and other centers of Black life within the federal District.

⁹³ “Burial of Nelson Vale,” *Evening Star*, July 9, 1900; United States Census, 1900; United States Census, 1910; United States Census, 1920; United States Census, 1930, database with images, *Ancestry.com*, <http://ancestry.com> (Washington, DC: National Records and Archives Administration, n.d.).

CHAPTER TWO

“LAW-ABIDING CITIZENS . . . WELL THOUGHT OF”

On November 4, 1904, members of the Fort Reno community gathered to dedicate the new public school being opened in their midst, the Jesse Lee Reno School. The brick, four-room school had been built specifically to serve the Black community that lived on and around the old fort and, to celebrate the school's opening, its teachers and pupils gathered alongside local dignitaries like District Commissioner Henry Brown Floyd McFarland and Alexander Tait Stuart, the Scottish-born superintendent of the Washington school system.⁹⁴ Also in attendance was Major Christian Fleetwood, a Black Civil War veteran and Medal of Honor recipient who had moved to Washington after the war and secured a position with the Freedmen's Bank and, later, as a clerk in the War Department.⁹⁵ As part of the ceremony, Laura Iredell Hawkesworth, the Reno School's principal and Fleetwood's sister-in-law, received the key to the new building, the assembled children sung patriotic songs, and Fleetwood spoke.⁹⁶ Fleetwood's words have been lost to history, but the words of W.S. Montgomery, the first African American assistant superintendent of the Washington school system, were reprinted in that day's *Evening Star*.⁹⁷ “Here a little more than four decades ago,” explained Montgomery, “cannon were pointed in every direction, guarding the way to the nation's capital.” Now, “the war drums throb[bed] no longer,” and those assembled had come to “dedicate a building in which the descendants of those freed by the immortal Lincoln may come into the inheritance of civilization.” At the Reno School, the “late slave,” explained Montgomery, would receive the education that would allow him to become an “additive” part of the nation, and to “preserve, increase and transmit the achievements of the ages to the coming generations

⁹⁴ “Shivering Pupils Excused for Day,” *Washington Times*, December 16, 1910; United States Census, 1910.

⁹⁵ Glenn Johnson, “Christian Fleetwood: And Now . . . For the Rest of the Story,” Stevenson University, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://www.stevenson.edu/academics/undergraduate-programs/history/blog-news-events/christian-fleetwood-and-now-for-the-rest-of-the-story>

⁹⁶ Mary Maillard, *Whispers of Cruel Wrongs: The Correspondence of Louisa Jacobs and Her Circle, 1879–1911* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017), 44–45.

⁹⁷ Louis R. Harlan and Raymond W. Smock, eds., *The Booker T. Washington papers. Volume 5, 1899–1900* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 472.

for still greater perfection.” After Montgomery had finished, exercises outside the new Reno School closed with another patriotic song, followed by a benediction.⁹⁸

The members of Fort Reno’s Black community had sought a new school for their children for some time. Back in February 1898, a committee of six local leaders, including florist Thornton Lewis and Charles R. Champ, pastor of the nearby Rock Creek Baptist Church, had secured an audience with school board official Sterling Brown. The school at Grant Road that the Black children of Fort Reno were then attending was inadequate to the number of students enrolled, and, as a result, Black children in the area were receiving only “partial instruction each day.” The committee of six told Brown in no uncertain terms that they were “aroused over the prospect of not getting school accommodations for their children.”⁹⁹ The opening of the Reno School marked their campaign for new school facilities as a success, but it had not come without controversy. At one point, District officials had contemplated placing the new school near the old building on Grant Road; in early 1902, white residents of Grant Road, worried that the building of a new school for Black children would negatively impact their property values, petitioned the District Commissioners and urged that the new school be placed nearer to Fort Reno. Most of the area’s Black residents, the Grant Road petitioners explained, “lived on or about Fort Reno,” and they had themselves, according to the whites of Grant Road, petitioned that the new school be “located on Fort Reno.”¹⁰⁰ In March of the same year, James B. Wimer protested to the Commissioners against the use of any land in Reno for the purposes of building a school for Black children; Wimer instead suggested that “steps be taken to purchase the entire [Fort Reno] subdivision as the site for a park.”¹⁰¹ Several months later, in August 1902, “a delegation from Tennallytown . . . called upon the Commissioners to protest against the selection of any site that would have an unfavorable impact upon the property of the white residents.” This delegation pronounced itself satisfied with the site chosen for the school, contained as it was within the old Dyer estate on which the Fort Reno community had taken root.¹⁰²

The building of the Fort Reno school represented an institutional embodiment of local officials’ recognition that Fort Reno was an African American community of significant size. Hundreds of African Americans had built homes and businesses on the old Fort or on the blocks surrounding it, and the Reno School was filled until 1926, when it boasted an enrollment of 126 students. Fort Reno was never an all-Black enclave; Black residents

⁹⁸ “School Dedication,” *Evening Star*, November 4, 1904.

⁹⁹ “School Building Wanted,” *Evening Star*, February 21, 1898.

¹⁰⁰ “Petition of the Taxpayers of Grant Road,” undated, circa February 1902, HR57A-F1.2, 1.3, Com on Appropriation to District of Columbia Fortifications, Box 6, HMFY 2007, Accompanying Paper Files, 57 Congress, Records of the US House of Representatives 57th Congress, RG 233.

¹⁰¹ “Files a Protest—Local Landowner Objects to Site Selected for Colored School,” *Evening Star*, March 3, 1902.

¹⁰² “Growth in Northwest,” *Washington Post*, August 24, 1902.

lived alongside white families on many of its streets. The neighborhood’s uneasy coexistence with local white communities, however, was reflected in the protests that accompanied the opening of the Reno School, two seemingly designed to keep Fort Reno’s Black population from spreading beyond its confines, and the third designed to accomplish Reno’s destruction altogether. Eventually, local whites were successful in their crusade to wipe Reno off the map, and the Reno School closed in 1950, having served fewer than ten students during its last years of operation. The story of Reno’s destruction will be told in the following chapter; the present chapter focuses on daily life in the neighborhood, from the last decades of the nineteenth century through the early decades of the twentieth century, during which time Fort Reno was—to use the words of two longtime members, Thornton Lewis and Samuel Hebron—a community of “law-abiding citizens, working men, well thought of” who sought “to live a higher and nobler life.”¹⁰³



Figure 7: View south toward National Cathedral from Reno water tower, early twentieth century.
(Courtesy of National Park Service)

¹⁰³ Lewis quoted in *Acquirement of Reno Subdivision in the District of Columbia; Hearing Before the Committee on the District of Columbia, United States Senate, Sixty-Ninth Congress, First Session, on S. 1719, A Bill to Provide for the Purchase or Condemnation of Property in the Reno Subdivision, and Adjacent Thereto, for the Purpose of Improvement of the Street Plan, and for Other Purposes, June 2, 1926* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1926), 18; Hebron quoted in *Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on the District of Columbia House of Representatives, Sixty-Ninth Congress, Second Session, Appointed to Investigate Affairs of the District of Columbia, Volume I*, 766.

The Churches of Fort Reno

One way to appreciate Reno’s status as a center of Black life in Northwest Washington is to look at the congregations it fostered; in the last decades of the nineteenth century, African Americans from the surrounding communities began making the trip to Reno for Sunday services at the various Black churches established in the subdivision. Founded in 1872, Rock Creek Baptist Church was the oldest congregation in Reno, and the congregation to which it seems a majority of the neighborhood’s residents belonged.¹⁰⁴ In addition to housing religious services and baptizing new converts in Rock Creek, the church organized a range of community activities; when interviewed in the 1970s, former Reno resident Mary Daniel remembered the church sponsoring pageants, lawn parties, picnics, and Sunday School trips to the Washington Zoo.¹⁰⁵ William Armstead Jones, who as an infant had survived the Lincoln administration’s ill-starred attempt to found a Black colony on Ile-de-Vache off the coast of Haiti, had grown up in the nearby River Road community, and he served as Rock Creek Baptist’s pastor for many decades. Jones, who had studied at Howard University, presided over funeral services for numerous long-term residents of Fort Reno.¹⁰⁶ Rock Creek Baptist seems to have been a relatively high-profile congregation during its years in Reno. In 1906, the Reno-based church hosted the thirtieth annual meeting of the Mount Bethel Baptist Association, which brought together Baptist congregations from the District, Maryland, and Virginia. During the course of the multi-day conference, attendees discussed church business and directed their attention to the problem of lynching, appointing a “committee on ‘the state of the country’” which would gather “certain facts relative to lynchings” and report back the following year, and passing several anti-lynching resolutions, one of which held that “our American civilization . . . which is claimed to be a model for the world, is constantly shocked by the unlawful taking of human life by mob violence.” The conference at Rock Creek Baptist was so well attended that “[m]any were turned away . . . the crowd being so great that there was no standing room.”¹⁰⁷

Reno’s second Black church, St. Mark’s Methodist Episcopal Church, was founded in 1888.¹⁰⁸ Newspaper clippings from the 1890s indicate that St. Mark’s Methodist held camp meetings and Children’s Day events, in which members of the Prather and

¹⁰⁴ Kathan, Rispin and Whitley, “Forgotten African American Community of River Road,” 17.

¹⁰⁵ “Interview at Rock Creek Baptist Church, August 2, 1977,” 24; Untitled notice, *The Critic*, June 4, 1883.

¹⁰⁶ Kathan, Rispin and Whitley, “Forgotten African American Community of River Road,” 18–19; “Pastor Ordained,” *Evening Star*, August 21, 1902.

¹⁰⁷ Quotations appear in “Session Brought to Close,” *Evening Star*, August 31, 1906; “In Annual Session—Mt. Bethel Association of Colored Baptists,” *Evening Star*, August 30, 1906.

¹⁰⁸ Kathan, Rispin and Whitley, “Forgotten African American Community of River Road,” 17.

Masterson families played leading roles, and they show that the church was rebuilt in 1896.¹⁰⁹ In 1906, St. Alban’s Episcopal Church appointed the Episcopal clergyman Edward Douse, a native of Kingston, Jamaica, to live and work in Fort Reno. At the time of Douse’s appointment, explained the *Washington Post*, “there was only one family in the sparsely settled neighborhood who called themselves Episcopalians,” but by June 1913 Douse had won many converts, as in that month seventy families attended a ceremony at Fort Reno for the laying of the cornerstone of a new Episcopalian mission, christened St. George’s.¹¹⁰ NCPPC records indicate that, by the 1930s, Reno also boasted a Methodist Episcopal Church known as Mount Asbury, which counted Samuel Hebron among its trustees.¹¹¹ These church communities instilled in their congregants fierce loyalties that survived Fort Reno’s destruction. When in the 1970s students from Woodrow Wilson High School sought former Reno residents to interview, they found former Reno-dweller Mary Daniel working as Rock Creek Baptist’s clerk. Daniel spoke with the students and introduced them to two additional former residents of Reno, Eddie Dixon and Augusta Moore, who said that the church they had known since their days in Fort Reno helped them keep in touch with their former neighbors.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ “Some Improvements,” *Evening Star*, December 5, 1896; untitled notice, August 14, 1894, *Evening Star*; untitled notice, *Evening Star*, June 15, 1896.

¹¹⁰ “Home of ‘God’s Flock,’” *Washington Post*, June 6, 1913.

¹¹¹ Trustees of Mount Asbury Church, Land Purchase Contract, October 31, 1936, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924-1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 46, A1-E18.

¹¹² “Interview at Rock Creek Baptist Church, August 2, 1977,” 5.



Figure 8: Mount Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church, circa 1930s. (Courtesy of National Archives, NAID 17368312)

Life and Work in Reno

The Fort Reno neighborhood in which these churches took root retained a rural character even as the surrounding area became ever more connected to Washington’s city center. In the 1890s, the area surrounding Reno was still wooded enough that reports were sufficiently credible that “Foultz, [an] elusive colored murderer” had been “concealed in the woods . . . in the vicinity of Chevy Chase and Tenleytown . . . for about twenty days, his food being secretly supplied by friends at Fort Reno” that “all the county police, reserves from Georgetown and about 100 farmers, armed with rifles and shotguns,” joined in the search.¹¹³ The building of a reservoir by the District in the 1890s, and subsequent improvements upon it, removed the last vestiges of the old fort by the close of the first decade of the

¹¹³ The posse did not find Foultz, but they did find “a basket filled with provisions,” which indicated that someone had been living there in the woods, though that someone could not be positively identified as Foultz. See “Hunting for Foultz,” *Evening Star*, September 7, 1897.

twentieth century, but the Bangerter family’s cows could be seen grazing south of the accompanying water tower into the early 1900s.¹¹⁴ Remembering her childhood in Fort Reno, Mary Daniel explained that one had to walk up a “stony little thing” to get to local establishments like Jesse Smith’s store or Charles Burgin’s lunch room. “All of this was rugged, understand,” Daniel recalled. “There weren’t any sidewalks or anything.” Daniel remembered that some residents of the neighborhood had kept gardens, while others had raised a variety of animals, including chickens, turkeys, and ducks. Many families kept pigs, and, according to Daniel, “most everybody had trees of some sort.”¹¹⁵ In later years, former residents would reminisce about the days when they “didn’t have to go the grocery store for nothing. There were peaches and pear trees and grapes in our back yard.”¹¹⁶ Reno remained rural enough that, as late as 1912, it served as an ideal retreat site for a “colored troop of Boy Scouts” who “encamped at Fort Reno.”¹¹⁷

Reno’s heights provided a cool refuge from the summer heat. Jennie Johnson Brown, who lived on Chesapeake Street, and whose grandparents had lived on Fessenden Street, remembered walking up to Fessenden, “up around the fort,” which was “the coolest part of the park.” Speaking in 1937, Brown explained that, “We always walk up that way at night, after I get home from work . . . For the last twenty years we have been going out every night up there. It is very cool at night . . . we rest a little while and then always circle around there and spend a little time on the reservoir . . . ”¹¹⁸ During Reno’s heyday, most of its roads were unpaved. Originally, many of the subdivision’s roads had been named after Union generals: Sherman, Kearny, McPherson, Howard. Many of these roads’ names were changed in 1905 to conform to Washington’s alphabetic naming system, and their maintenance would be one of the chief concerns of the RCA when it came into being during the 1910s.¹¹⁹

Fort Reno was a working-class neighborhood. A significant minority of Reno-dwellers, both men and women, secured low-level government positions, but most worked blue-collar jobs. Many women worked as domestics for local families or laundresses. Common occupations for men living in Reno included butler, chauffeur, janitor,

¹¹⁴ Helm, *Tenleytown*, 178, 397. According to A. M. Schneider of the *Washington Post*, in January 1906, “building operations on Fort Reno [were] obliterating the last vestiges of the civil war breastworks.” See A. M. Schneider, “Real Estate Echoes,” *Washington Times*, January 7, 1906. Even so, the *Evening Star* claimed in 1914 that, at Fort Reno, “here and there [one can find] mounds and depressions which were part of the earthwork.” See “Fort Drive,” *Evening Star*, May 18, 1914.

¹¹⁵ “Interview at Rock Creek Baptist Church, August 2, 1977,” 14–15, 33–34.

¹¹⁶ “A Tender Tribute to Old Tenleytown,” *Washington Post*, September 15, 1983.

¹¹⁷ Quotations appear in, “Scout Martin Shoots Boy Accidentally,” *Washington Post*, September 5, 1912. See also “Boy Scout Shot,” *Washington Times*, September 5, 1912.

¹¹⁸ Brown’s testimony found in transcript of District Court Condemnation Case #2471, April 7, 1937, RG 21, Records of the District Courts of the United States, Entry 485, 106–111. Courtesy of Neil Flanagan.

¹¹⁹ “Naming New Streets—Commissioners Try Their Hand in Georgetown District,” *Washington Post*, April 26, 1905.

construction worker, gardener, and day laborer. Poverty was a fact of life for some in Reno. When Barney Williams, “a colored man, who lived at Fort Reno,” died of natural causes in 1895, his family could not afford to pay for a funeral, and he was buried by the District of Columbia in an unmarked grave in the potter’s field.¹²⁰ Many Reno-dwellers worked dangerous jobs, and some suffered serious injuries and even death on the job. In October 1894, Fort Reno’s Calvin Ball was cleaning lime stains off the bricks of St. Matthew’s Church on Rhode Island Avenue, perched on a chair suspended by a rope forty feet off the ground that snapped and sent Ball plummeting to the ground. The fall paralyzed him below the waist, and a physician pronounced his condition “almost hopeless.”¹²¹ Lloyd Ware, another Reno resident, met a similarly tragic fate three years later, when he received a fatal electric shock while working to repair the trolley line between Tenleytown and Georgetown. Ware had worked on the railway for seven years without suffering an accident, and had, according to the *Evening Star*, earned “the esteem and good will of all of the white residents of Tenleytown.” He left behind a widow and seven children, and his loss was “greatly deplored . . . by his many friends at Fort Reno . . .”¹²² To help make ends meet, teenaged children of Fort Reno’s working-class families sometimes took on dangerous work, with tragic results. In March 1911, thirteen-year-old Mills Reddick, who lived on Howard Street, was busy carrying water to a crew doing grading work on Connecticut Avenue when he was struck by a rail car and killed.¹²³

Fred Green, the head of one of Fort Reno’s oldest families, was luckier in 1905 when he suffered an accident while working on the “new agricultural building” at 13th and B Streets Southwest. An electric motor that was being hoisted into place fell and struck Green on the head; Green was sent to the hospital in an ambulance, but his injury did not prove serious.¹²⁴ Tragedy, however, struck Reno a decade later when, in 1914, John D. Masterson was killed in an explosion in Rock Creek Park. Masterson was the grandson of another John Masterson, who had made his first appearance in the West Part of Washington in the 1870 census, and the son of Daniel Masterson, who had rented houses on 41st Street and Belt Road. By 1910, John and his wife, Clara, were renting a house of their own on 41st Street, and he had found work as a laborer doing concrete work.¹²⁵ In 1914, he was working for the Warren F. Brenizer Company, which was excavating a tunnel

¹²⁰ “Died Suddenly,” *Evening Star*, March 14, 1895; ““Rattle His Bones Over the Stones,”” *Washington Times*, March 15, 1895.

¹²¹ “The Chair Fell—Serious Accident to Calvin Ball at St. Matthew’s New Church,” *Evening Star*, October 26, 1894.

¹²² Quotations appear in, “Instantly Killed—Lloyd Ware Receives a Fatal Shock from a Live Electric Wire,” *Evening Star*, August 5, 1897, and “Killed by a Live Wire,” *Evening Times*, August 5, 1897.

¹²³ “Inquest into Boy’s Death,” *Evening Star*, March 21, 1911.

¹²⁴ “Workman Injured,” *Evening Star*, August 16, 1905.

¹²⁵ United States Census, 1870; United States Census, 1900; United States Census, 1910.

in Rock Creek Park. On July 7, a night crew had charged a pit with dynamite but neglected to tell the morning shift, and, when Masterson and his day crew went to work, the resulting explosion killed Masterson and another man, George Boxley. Clara Masterson and Boxley’s widow, Lulu, sued the Brenizer Company and won judgments, but they were convinced by their attorneys the awards were too small; on a retrial of the case, they lost and received nothing. This tragedy and its bitter postscript surely devastated the Mastersons, but they remained on 41st Street into the latter decades of the twentieth century, well after most remnants of the Fort Reno neighborhood had been destroyed.¹²⁶

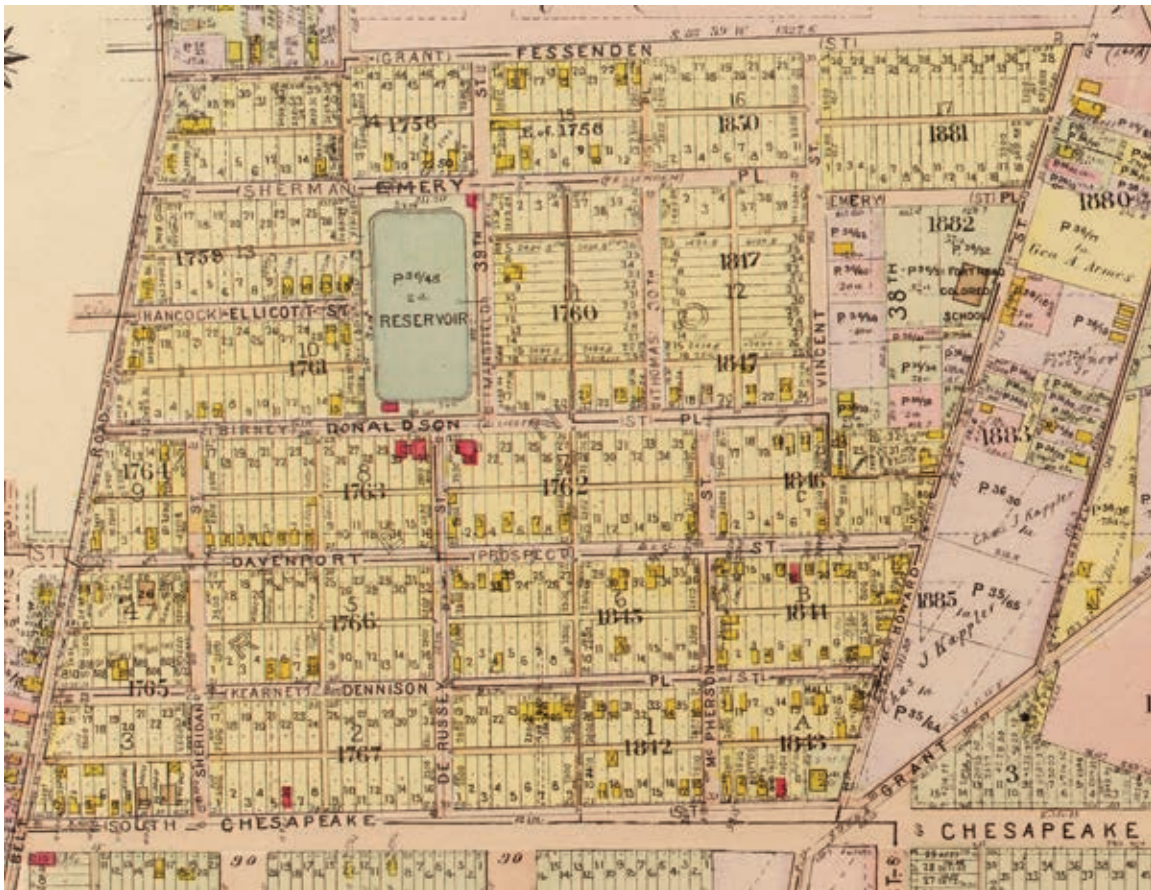


Figure 9: 1919 real estate survey map showing Fort Reno neighborhood. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

¹²⁶ Untitled notice, *Washington Herald*, September 2, 1914; “Lose Awards in Appeal—Jury in Two \$10,000 Damage Suits Reverse Former Judgments,” *Evening Star*, June 16, 1916.

Community Leaders

Some in Reno attained positions within the city and federal governments which allowed them to leave manual pursuits for less dangerous work, and it might be assumed that the status this type of employment conferred, and the regular paychecks it entailed, would have marked these individuals off as community leaders. This was not necessarily the case, as records related to the RCA indicate that day laborers and government clerks alike served in places of distinction. In the early 1910s, Walter Carter, who worked as a janitor in the local police department and lived with his wife Bettie on Davenport Street, served as the RCA’s treasurer.¹²⁷ Alfred Neale, a laborer who worked on the local roads, served as sergeant-of-arms, and Morris Harper, a laborer in the government service, Walker Clark, a street laborer, and David Reed, a plumber, all headed committees.¹²⁸ So too did new arrivals share leadership positions with longtime Reno residents. The president of the RCA for most of the 1910s was Zachariah T. Thomas, who had been born in Mississippi in 1875; when he settled in the federal district, he rented a home on Davenport Street and found work in the District as a government watchman.¹²⁹ Women, too, served in leadership roles. RCA records indicate that multiple women headed committees and that Lillian Neale, Alfred Neale’s wife, served as the organization’s chaplain for a time.¹³⁰ Blue-collar occupation did not disqualify Reno-dwellers from holding positions of community respect; rather, it seems that the residents of this working-class neighborhood, who knew how hard husbands and wives and mothers and fathers struggled to support their families, made their decisions about who to recognize as leaders based on character rather than occupational status, length of community residence, or gender.

¹²⁷ United States Census, 1910; “Walter Carter Dies,” *Evening Star*, May 12, 1919. Based on the funeral notice for her mother, Martha Strother Wormley, Bettie Carter seems to have been related to the Wormley family of Washington, DC, one of the most prominent African American families of the era in the nation’s capital. See Funeral notice for Martha Strother Wormley, *Evening Star*, February 20, 1910.

¹²⁸ “Needs of Fort Reno —Discussed at November Meeting of the Citizens’ Association,” *Evening Star*, November 20, 1913; United States Census, 1910.

¹²⁹ United States Census, 1910.

¹³⁰ “Needs of Fort Reno—Discussed at November Meeting”; “Reno Citizens Choose Z. T. Thomas President,” *Evening Star*, Jan 14, 1916.



Figure 10: Belt Road Market, early twentieth century. (Courtesy of National Park Service)

RCA records also prove that Black families who lived outside of Reno proper participated in its activities, considering themselves part of the Fort Reno community though they did not live “on the fort.” Thornton Lewis was the RCA’s long-term vice president. By the time the RCA became active in the early 1910s, Lewis had lived in the area for many years, having applied for a building permit in Tenleytown as far back as 1879. Newspaper records indicate that he had led a group called the Tennallytown Mounted Guards in the district’s 1886 Emancipation Celebration and applied for a liquor license for an establishment on Grant Road in 1888.¹³¹ By 1910, he and his wife Lucy had purchased a home at 4326 Wisconsin Avenue, several blocks south of Reno, and had opened up a flower shop; eventually, Lewis did build a home in the Reno neighborhood, but he had emerged as a community leader before becoming a resident of Reno proper.¹³² At least two committee heads named at a November 1913 meeting of the RCA lived outside of Reno: Walker Clark, who owned land in Reno but lived east of Rock Creek Park,

¹³¹ “Building Permits,” *Evening Star*, August 19, 1879; “Emancipation Celebration—Programme of Parade and the Route Selected,” *National Republican*, April 10, 1886; “Liquor Licenses,” *Evening Star*, December 17, 1888.

¹³² United States Census, 1910.

headed the committee on health and sanitation, and Sadie A. Boyde, who lived with her husband Thomas and three children on 5th Street, led the committee on entertainment.¹³³ Officer positions too sometimes went to members of the Fort Reno community who lived outside the bounds of the subdivision. John Tunstall, a street laborer who lived with his wife Biddie on 23rd Street, served as sergeant-at-arms during a January 1916 meeting of the RCA, and in October 1916 Dennis Cook, who had lived in Reno at the turn of the century but by 1920 was living on Oakdale Street with his sister Anna, was listed as the organization’s chaplain.¹³⁴ Perhaps, like Cook, some of these non-Reno-dwellers who showed up in positions of authority had once made their homes in Reno; perhaps they simply had friends or family in the neighborhood and were drawn into the Reno community by association. But residence within Reno itself was not a prerequisite for attaining a position of leadership within the Reno community.

William Armstead Jones, the longtime pastor of Rock Creek Baptist Church, lived for much of his life outside of Fort Reno. As previously noted, he grew up in the River Road community in Bethesda, and the 1910 census found him living at 3313 Que Street Northwest with his wife Alice; twenty-eight years later, when one of Howard University sociologist E. Franklin Frazier’s interviewers tracked him down as part of a study of Washington’s Black community, Jones was living at 2803 N Street.¹³⁵ Unfortunately, T.E. Davis, the interviewer who spoke to Jones, got little information, as Jones “was seemingly in a hurry to get into the house (probably to eat dinner).” Jones did offer Davis the chance to come to Rock Creek Baptist some Sunday to talk with the congregation: “I will give you an opportunity to talk to my people,” he said. Disappointed that he had not gotten more from Jones, Davis tarried around the aged minister’s house for some time, observing Jones as the minister watched a group of boys play a game of softball at a local field. “Their profanity did not disturb him and neither did his presence seem to make any difference to the players,” Davis recorded. It is unfortunate for the purposes of the present study that Davis seems never to have visited Rock Creek Baptist to confer with the congregation, but the sketch of Jones suggests a man of the people comfortable with the rhythms of daily life, giving us a picture of this leader of the Reno community who, like Thornton Lewis and others, lived outside of Fort Reno and yet played a vital part in the neighborhood’s community life.¹³⁶

¹³³ Anonymous, Handwritten document labeled “Reno,” October 19, 1931, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1926–1961, 5001-0 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18; “Needs of Fort Reno – Discussed at November Meeting.”

¹³⁴ “Guard Rail is Urged—Citizens Want One at McPherson and Chesapeake Streets,” *Evening Star*, October 14, 1916; “Reno Citizens Choose Z. T. Thomas President,” *Evening Star*, Jan 14, 1916.

¹³⁵ Kathan, Rispin and Whitley, “Forgotten African American Community of River Road,” 17–18; United States Census, 1910.

¹³⁶ Interview with W.A. Jones, June 28, 1938, Research Projects, Negro Youth Study, Washington, DC, 131–111, Folder One, MSRC, Howard University, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Manuscript Division.

Reno’s First Families

Of course, the majority of those who appeared in records left by the RCA—whether as officers, committee heads, or in other capacities—lived within the Fort Reno subdivision. By combining census records, newspaper items, and sources related to the clearing of Reno, it is possible to reconstruct the histories of several Reno families, such as the Green family, which made its first appearance in the Tenleytown census in 1880. In that year, census officials found Frederick Green and his wife Sarah Jane living with their daughters Irene and Tusey in the West Part of Washington.¹³⁷ Sarah was the daughter of Reason and Christie Jane Addison, a Black couple that lived just outside of Reno on Murdock Road.¹³⁸ Both Fred and Sarah hailed from either the District of Columbia or Maryland—different censuses indicated different places of birth for the couple—and were born in the 1850s. Given that both places boasted substantial free Black populations in the late antebellum period, it is possible that Fred and Sarah were born free. By 1900, Fred and Sarah had purchased a house on Prospect Street, likely pooling the wages Fred earned as a day laborer with those his daughter Gertrude—surely the same daughter identified as Tusey in the 1880 census—earned as a life insurance agent, and that his son Wyatt earned as a cart driver.¹³⁹ By this point, the Greens’ daughter Esther Irene had married into another longtime Reno family, the Warrens and in 1912, Gertrude married Hugh V. Denman, a native of Texas who had moved to the District in the early twentieth century.¹⁴⁰ Denman secured a position with the Government Printing Office in the 1910s and became a minister at St. Mark’s Methodist Episcopal Church in Reno; Denman later seems to have held a position in one of the Office Buildings of the House of Representatives.¹⁴¹ By 1920, Gertrude too had secured a position with the federal government, and census officials listed her that year as a charwoman working in government service.¹⁴² The Greens were community leaders; at a

¹³⁷ United States Census, 1880.

¹³⁸ Cortez, “History of an Age,” 14; United States Census, 1870.

¹³⁹ United States Census, 1900.

¹⁴⁰ Rotenstein, “The River Road Moses Cemetery,” 58; “Marriage Licenses,” *Evening Star*, April 3, 1894; “Marriage Licenses,” *Evening Star*, November 2, 1912.

¹⁴¹ Upon Denman’s death, Gertrude took out an ad in the *Evening Star* to thank the ministers of the Methodist Episcopal District Conference as well as the “employees [sic] of the House Office Building” for their sympathy during his illness and at the time of his death. Denman had resigned from the Government Printing Office in 1919, so it seems fair to assume that he had taken on a new position at a House of Representatives Office Building. See “Cards of Thanks,” *Evening Star*, September 13, 1925; “Government Printing Office Notes,” *Washington Post*, August 17, 1919.

¹⁴² United States Census, 1920.

1916 meeting at which community residents voiced their preference for delegates to represent the District’s Black community at the upcoming national Republican convention, Fred served as sergeant-at-arms.¹⁴³

Fred and Sarah Green were involved in the most notorious incident to take place in Reno during the neighborhood’s decades of existence: the killing of Alexander Jackson by longtime Reno-dweller Nelson Vale, known around the neighborhood as “Old Nelse.” Details of the Vale murder were fodder for numerous articles in District newspapers, and local reporters explained that the killing was seemingly motivated by Vale’s jealousy over the attentions paid to his twenty-four-year-old live-in housekeeper, Mary Ellis, by Alexander Jackson, a railroad laborer who had moved to Reno from Baltimore some months before and was boarding with William Prather, two doors down from Vale’s residence.¹⁴⁴ In addition to living in proximity, Vale and Jackson worked together on “the Rockville electric road.”¹⁴⁵ Before the murder, in 1899, Fred Green had been involved in an altercation with Vale and Ellis; assisting Vale in the scuffle, Ellis had chopped at Green’s arm with an ax, and Green had hit her with a baseball bat, breaking her arm and injuring her head.¹⁴⁶ Several weeks later, Ellis had Green arrested by the Tenleytown police for threats he had allegedly made against her.¹⁴⁷ Newspaper accounts filed about the subsequent murder, which took place in January 1900, identified this as one of several incidents that preceded the murder in which jealousies involving Ellis had ended in violence. The Greens’ home was adjacent to Vale’s residence, and Fred and Sarah witnessed the lead-up to and aftermath of the murder. To local reporters covering the killing, Green reported hearing Vale admit that he had killed Jackson. Testifying at Vale’s trial, Green added that he had heard Vale threaten that he would get Jackson, “before the sun goes down.” Sarah Green also testified at Vale’s trial, confirming the threats made by Vale and describing the argument between Jackson and Vale that preceded the shooting, as well as the shooting itself.¹⁴⁸ On the strength of such testimony, Vale was convicted and sentenced to death.

¹⁴³ “Action of Reno Citizens,” *Evening Star*, February 23, 1916.

¹⁴⁴ “Prompted by Jealousy,” *Washington Times*, January 15, 1900.

¹⁴⁵ “Held for Grand Jury,” *Evening Star*, January 15, 1900; “A Murder Trial,” *Evening Star*, March 23, 1900; “Negro Kills His Rival,” *Washington Post*, January 15, 1900.

¹⁴⁶ “Man and Woman in a Lively Scrap,” *Evening Star*, March 13, 1899; “Affairs in Georgetown,” January 25, 1900.

¹⁴⁷ “Affairs in Georgetown,” April 12, 1899.

¹⁴⁸ Fred and Sarah Green quoted in, “A Murder Trial—Nelson Vale Accused of Killing Alexander Jackson,” *Evening Star*, March 23, 1900. See also, “Held for Grand Jury—Nelson Vale Responsible for Death of Alexander Jackson,” *Evening Star*, January 15, 1900.

Even though every juror on his case signed a statement urging that Vale’s sentence be commuted to life imprisonment, Vale was hanged in July of 1900; he was, at the time, the oldest man ever executed in the District.¹⁴⁹

The 1910 and 1920 censuses found the Greens living in the house they owned at 3812 Davenport Street, a two-story pebble-dash frame house with five rooms and no bath that was equipped with an outdoor privy and water tap.¹⁵⁰ By 1910, the Greens had taken in Sarah’s mother Christy, who census officials at various points also listed as Christa or Jennie. Christy Jane Addison lived with the Greens until her death in 1922.¹⁵¹ Fred died in 1926 and was followed by Sarah two years later; despite her son-in-law Hugh Denman’s affiliation with St. Mark’s Methodist, her funeral took place at Rock Creek Baptist Church.¹⁵² The Green family held on to their property on Davenport Street until 1940, renting it out to other Black families; 1940 found Fred and Sarah’s children renting out their parents’ house to the family of Edward Coleman, who worked as a butler.¹⁵³ The Green children sold the house in July 1940 for \$2,170. In that year, Wyatt remained in the District’s Northwest quadrant, living on S Street, whereas Gertrude had remarried after the 1925 death of her husband Hugh, and was living on Florida Avenue Northeast.¹⁵⁴ Esther remained in Reno, in the house she had shared with her husband, James L. Warren, who belonged to a family that, like the Greens, had put down deep roots in the Fort Reno community.¹⁵⁵

It is unclear when, exactly, the Warrens migrated to Fort Reno from Virginia but, when interviewed by historian Judith Beck Helm, J. Rudolph Warren explained that, after the Civil War, his grandfather Edward had driven a cow from Richmond to Washington, DC so that he could purchase a lot in Reno for \$25.¹⁵⁶ The family did not appear in the 1870 or 1880 census counts of Northwest Washington, but in 1900, census officials found the Warrens as homeowners on Kearny Street, with Edward supporting his family as a laborer. Warren’s son James L. Warren lived next door; children George, Lucy, and Florence, and

¹⁴⁹ “Nelson Vale Executed,” *Evening Times*, July 6, 1900; “Petition for Commutation of Sentence,” *Evening Star*, June 7, 1900.

¹⁵⁰ Document labeled “Fort Reno, Square 1760, Lot 23,” Bernard M. Grant File, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 45 A1-E18; United States Census, 1910; United States Census, 1920.

¹⁵¹ “Found Dead in Bed,” *Evening Star*, March 1, 1922; United States Census, 1910; United States Census, 1920.

¹⁵² Death notice for Sarah Jane Greene, *Evening Star*, September 25, 1928; Frederick Greene, Death Certificate, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924-196500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 45 A1-E18.

¹⁵³ “United States Census, 1940,” database with images, *Ancestry.com*, <http://ancestry.com> (Washington, DC: National Records and Archives Administration, n.d.)

¹⁵⁴ Gertrude Jackson to T. S. Settle, November 23, 1940, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924-1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 45 A1-E18.

¹⁵⁵ United States Census, 1940.

¹⁵⁶ Helm, *Tenleytown*, 168.

grandchildren Priscila and William, resided with Edward and his wife Susan. Census records indicate that both Edward and Susan, born Susan Cousins, were born in Virginia in the early 1840s.¹⁵⁷ Edward was almost certainly born to enslaved parents; Susan was the daughter of Amy Cousins, an enslaved woman who, at one point her life, was owned by Thomas Jefferson. This fact seems to have been something of a point of pride for the family, who mentioned it in Cousins’s obituary. At her death, family members fixed Cousins’s birthdate at 1805, although census takers in 1900 had recorded her date of birth as 1819; either date would make her claim of enslavement by the nation’s third president plausible. In poor health, Cousins had moved to Washington to live with Edward and Susan in the mid-1880s, and she became known as “one of Tenleytown’s best and most picturesque characters.” By her own reckoning, she was 104 years old, and she “attributed her longevity and good health to the habit of dispensing with medicine.” Her funeral service was held at Rock Creek Baptist, and she had lived to see the births of seven grandchildren and eleven great-grandchildren. She stayed with Edward and Susan until two months before her death, when she moved in with her granddaughter Florence Bass, then living elsewhere on Kearny Street. Florence had married Grant Bass, a cement finisher who had migrated from South Carolina to Washington and was boarding with the Warrens when census officials visited them in 1900.¹⁵⁸

Edward and Susan’s son James L. Warren had married Esther I. Green, daughter of Fred and Sarah Green, in 1894, and around the turn of the century the couple experienced marital troubles.¹⁵⁹ Esther and James had lived together until 1898, when Esther left home, and three years later James filed for divorce; census officials did not find Esther and James living together in 1900, and they found the Warrens’ children, Rachella and James R., living with their grandparents, Fred and Sarah Green, on Prospect Street.¹⁶⁰ The source of the troubles in the Warrens’ marriage has been lost to history, but they reconciled and were found living together on Davenport Street in the 1910 and 1920 censuses.¹⁶¹ The Warrens seem to have been recognized as community leaders; at the July 1900 funeral for Nelson Vale, Edward had assisted in conducting the funeral rites.¹⁶² Edward’s son John E. Warren, who was listed in various census counts as a sorter at a sheeting shop, a common laborer, and a butler, but whom contemporaneous sources referred to as a minister, also possessed standing in the community. In February 1916, John assumed the presidency of a meeting of

¹⁵⁷ United States Census, 1900.

¹⁵⁸ Quotations appear in “Jefferson Slave; Dies at Age of 104,” *Washington Times*, Feb. 19, 1909; Death notice for Amy Cousins, *Evening Star*, February 18, 1909; “Was Jefferson’s Slave—Mrs. Amy Cousins Dies at Age of 104 Years,” *Evening Star*, February 19, 1909; United States Census, 1900.

¹⁵⁹ “Marriage Licenses,” *Evening Star*, April 3, 1894

¹⁶⁰ “Desertion Named in a Divorce Suit,” *Washington Times*, June 11, 1901; United States Census, 1900.

¹⁶¹ United States Census, 1910; United States Census, 1920.

¹⁶² “Burial of Nelson Vale,” *Evening Star*, July 9, 1900.

“Reno citizens” at which community residents considered delegates to represent the District’s Black community at the upcoming Republican national convention, the same meeting at which Fred Green served as sergeant-at-arms.¹⁶³

Throughout his life, Edward worked as a laborer of one type or another: listed as a day laborer in 1900, he appeared in the 1910 census as a slate worker. For a long time, James L. Warren supported his family in like manner, as he was listed as a day laborer in the 1900 census and a slate worker in the 1910 census; eventually, though, James obtained a position in the civil service, and he was listed as a messenger in the 1920 census.¹⁶⁴ His wife Esther worked for many years as a domestic for a local family, but she too obtained a government job, and by the time census officials interviewed her in 1930, she had become a charwoman working for the federal government.¹⁶⁵ The regular paychecks she and James received once they obtained government work allowed them the financial freedom to purchase their own home in Reno; James and Esther Warren had rented on Davenport Street for many years before James’ death in 1926, but the 1930 census found Esther living at 3812 Dennison Place, in a home valued at \$5000, with her son J. Rudolph Warren and two grandchildren.¹⁶⁶ J. Rudolph also found government employment, working as a chauffeur for the War Department from 1918 to 1922, and then as a chauffeur for the State Department, a position he kept for decades.¹⁶⁷ In 1930, census officials found Esther, J. Rudolph and the rest of the Warrens living down the street from her brother-in-law John and sister-in-law Ammy, both of whom also lived on Dennison.¹⁶⁸ Susan Warren died in 1908, and her husband Edward died in 1919; James L. Warren’s death in 1926 was followed by his brother John’s death in 1937.¹⁶⁹

Esther Warren lived in her house on Dennison until 1941; the 1940 census found her still living next to her sister-in-law Ammy, who had purchased her home during the intervening decade. Esther sold her home to the NCPPC for \$5,850 the following year.¹⁷⁰ By that point, her son J. Rudolph had moved to another part of DC’s Northwest quadrant—a confusing census entry suggests it may have been either O Street or 14th Street—and it

¹⁶³ “Action of Reno Citizens,” *Evening Star*, February 23, 1916; United States Census, 1910; United States Census, 1920; United States Census, 1930.

¹⁶⁴ United States Census, 1900; United States Census, 1910; United States Census, 1920.

¹⁶⁵ United States Census, 1910; United States Census, 1920; United States Census, 1930.

¹⁶⁶ United States Census, 1930.

¹⁶⁷ *Register of the Department of State* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1931), 250.

¹⁶⁸ United States Census, 1910; United States Census, 1920; United States Census, 1930.

¹⁶⁹ Death notice for Edward Warren, *Evening Star*, October 14, 1919; Death notice for James L. Warren, *Evening Star*, December 29, 1926; Death notice for Rev. John Edward Warren, *Evening Star*, November 4, 1937; Death notice for Susan Warren, *Evening Star*, April 28, 1908.

¹⁷⁰ Esther Irene Warren, Land Purchase Contract, August 15, 1941, RG 328 Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 47, A1-E18.

seems likely that Esther, and perhaps Ammy as well, joined her son, his wife Edna, and his daughter Esther F., once they vacated their homes in Reno. Esther and Ammy’s sister Florence Bass and her husband Grant had also left Reno by this point, settling in a rented house at 342 L Street NW.¹⁷¹ The Warrens were Baptists affiliated with the Rock Creek Baptist Church, the site of the funerals for Edward and James L. Warren, as well as James’s daughter Rachella.¹⁷² As evidenced by the fact that so many of Edward and Susan Warren’s children chose to live so close to one another in Reno for so long, the Warrens were a tight-knit family, and they clung to their homes in Fort Reno even as they saw their neighborhood dismantled in the 1930s.

As with the Warrens, multiple members of the Scott family lived in Fort Reno for decades. John F. Scott began building his house in Reno in 1898, and in 1900 census officials found him living with his wife Annie B. Scott and son Isiah W. Scott in the house they owned on South Street.¹⁷³ Scott’s house on South Street (renamed Chesapeake Street in 1905) had “five rooms and a shed kitchen, with all modern improvements,” and provided a commanding view of the surrounding area: “you can sit in my window and look over the tops of the other homes out there,” he later said.¹⁷⁴ At the turn of the century, John’s sister Chainey lived across town on Erie Street Northwest with their mother Lucie, who had been born in Virginia in the 1830s, and brother Edmond; in 1904, Chainey had married Simuel Becks, who had purchased land in Reno in 1901, and 1910 census officials found the couple in a house on Chesapeake Street near her brother John.¹⁷⁵ Chainey’s mother-in-law, Mariah Becks, was nearby, as she was also the mother of John F. Scott’s wife Annie, and she had moved in with her daughter. In 1900, John and Chainey’s brother Isiah W., for whom John named his son, also lived on South Street with his wife Ella, but by 1910 Isiah had died, and Ella lived on Chesapeake with her sons Curtis and Frank.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷¹ United States Census, 1940.

¹⁷² Death notice for Rochella Cecilia Warren, Evening Star, January 16, 1925.

¹⁷³ “Affairs in Georgetown—Building Operations,” Evening Star, December 1, 1898.

¹⁷⁴ *Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on the District of Columbia House of Representatives, Sixty-Ninth Congress, Second Session, Appointed to Investigate Affairs of the District of Columbia, Volume I*, 766.

¹⁷⁵ United States Census, 1900; United States Census, 1910; Notice of land transfer, Edward S. York et ux. to Samuel Beck, Evening Star, November 7, 1901.

¹⁷⁶ United States Census, 1900; United States Census, 1910.



Figure 11: 3915 Chesapeake Street, early twentieth century. (Courtesy of National Park Service)

To support his family, John worked first as a house cleaner and then secured a position as a janitor in a laboratory, a job he held for many years.¹⁷⁷ Chainey had started out as a second grade teacher in the DC public schools, but by the 1910s she had secured a position in the Department of Agriculture.¹⁷⁸ She died in 1919, and her funeral was held at the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church.¹⁷⁹ After her death, Simuel Becks moved out of Reno, and by the early 1930s he was living on Elm Street Northwest.¹⁸⁰ He retained possession of his and Chainey’s house until 1947, when he sold his former home on Chesapeake to the NCPPC for \$2,250. Commission records indicate that, by that point, Simuel and Chainey’s former home, a two-story, four-room frame dwelling, had fallen into disrepair and was

¹⁷⁷ United States Census, 1900; United States Census, 1910; United States Census, 1920.

¹⁷⁸ “Roster of the Teachers,” *Evening Times*, September 17, 1898.

¹⁷⁹ “Mrs. C. E. S. Becks,” *Washington Times*, March 1, 1919.

¹⁸⁰ Death notice for John H. Becks, *Evening Star*, January 13, 1932.

inhabited by a retired Black couple who paid Simuel \$10 monthly rent.¹⁸¹ John, Annie B., Ella, and Frank Scott, by contrast, lived with their families next door to one another on Chesapeake into the 1940s, testifying to their attachment to their homes and to the neighborhood they had helped build.¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ “Extract from Minutes of the 226th Meeting of the NCPPC, March 20–21, 1947,” RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1926-1961, 5001-0 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18; Land Purchase Contract, Simuel Becks and Louise Becks, April 4, 1947, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1926–1961, 5001-0 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.

¹⁸² United States Census, 1940.

TWS

NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION
WASHINGTON 25, D. C.

LAND PURCHASE CONTRACT

We (or I) hereby agree to sell, and to convey by deed of General Warranty to United States of America, fee simple title to the following described property located in the District of Columbia, namely:

LOT 18 in SQUARE 1842 (Lot Eighteen in Square Eighteen Hundred Forty-two)

for the sum of **FOUR THOUSAND FIVE HUNDRED AND NO/100**

Dollars, (\$ 4,500.00) all cash, as soon as a Certificate of Title of said property can be obtained from a Title Company acceptable to the United States showing the title to be good and free from all encumbrances and liens; all expenses of examination of title, and of preparation and recording of deed to the United States to be paid by the United States; all taxes due, including revenue stamps, water taxes, and special assessments; and all real estate taxes for the entire fiscal year in which settlement is made, and expenses of execution, to be paid by us (me); title to be good, free of all encumbrances and liens, and possession surrendered at date of transfer, and adjustment of rents on any existing leases to be made to that date.

WITNESS ☒ hand and seal this 9 day of April, 19 47.

WITNESSES:

_____ Francis S. Scott (SEAL)

_____ (SEAL)

_____ (SEAL)

Norman C. Brown,
Land Purchasing Officer,

I certify that the purchase price is
in accordance with the action of the
Commission and recommends approval.
Norman C. Brown
Land Purchasing Officer.

ACCEPTED, subject to the approval of the President.

NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION

By A. E. Demaray
A. E. Demaray, Acting Executive Officer

This 11 day of April, 1947.

Figure 12: Land purchase contract signed by Francis Scott, April 1947.
(Courtesy of National Archives, NAID 17368312)

That attachment was likely strengthened by the fact that the Scotts, relative newcomers to the area in comparison to a family like the Greens, had by the late 1920s taken on leadership roles within the Reno community. In 1928,

the RCA charged Frank with co-leadership of a delegation to speak to the District Commissioners about discrimination on local buses.¹⁸³ The year before, his uncle John was among a delegation of Reno-dwellers and allies who testified in front of a congressional subcommittee to oppose the clearing of the neighborhood.¹⁸⁴ Not all members of the Scott family stayed with Reno until the end: by 1940, John’s son Isiah had secured a clerkship with the Treasury Department and, along with his wife Pauline (who worked for the Bureau of Engraving) moved elsewhere in the city’s Northwest quadrant.¹⁸⁵ But the Scotts were committed to the homes they had built in Reno; as Scott said in 1927, while his home on Chesapeake was “no palace,” it had “taken [him] a lifetime . . . to secure it,” and he meant to stay there as long as he could.¹⁸⁶

Like the Scotts, the Dixons were a fixture in the Reno community for decades. Aaron Dixon married Helen Matthews, of the Broad Branch Road community, in 1884, and bought land near Broad Branch from Jerry Botts in 1887.¹⁸⁷ Both Helen and Aaron had been born either in the District of Columbia or Maryland—census records disagreed—sometime during or just after the Civil War.¹⁸⁸ The Dixons lived near Broad Branch until the turn of the twentieth century, and they were residing there when Helen’s brother, Thomas E. Matthews, was murdered by a local white man, John Shoemaker, in 1894.¹⁸⁹ Aaron’s son Eddie, interviewed in the 1970s, remembered that the Dixons moved from Broad Branch to Reno in 1900, and the 1910 census found Aaron and Helen renting a house on Davenport with their six children: Frank, Aaron Jr., Emma, Harry, Eddie, and Marie.¹⁹⁰ After a 1904 festival at the Rock Creek Baptist Church, a fight broke out on Chesapeake Street, and Aaron’s son Frank had his throat slashed “from ear to ear” by an

¹⁸³ “Plan Bus Complaint—Reno Citizens Will Carry Issue to Utilities Commission,” *Evening Star*, February 9, 1928.

¹⁸⁴ *Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on the District of Columbia House of Representatives, Sixty-Ninth Congress, Second Session, Appointed to Investigate Affairs of the District of Columbia, Volume I*, 766–768.

¹⁸⁵ United States Census, 1940.

¹⁸⁶ *Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on the District of Columbia House of Representatives, Sixty-Ninth Congress, Second Session, Appointed to Investigate Affairs of the District of Columbia, Volume I*, 766.

¹⁸⁷ “Transfers of Real Estate,” *Evening Star*, May 18, 1887; “The Wedding Ring,” March 4, 1884, *The Critic*.

¹⁸⁸ United States Census, 1900.

¹⁸⁹ Matthews and Shoemaker had been drinking together in Jesse Smith’s store with two other Black men from the Broad Branch community, and an argument had started; Dixon and his sister-in-law Lucy ran out of the house and found Thomas dying in a nearby yard. “Fighting for Life—Young Shoemaker on Trial for Murdering a Neighbor,” *Evening Star*, February 28, 1894; “The Matthews Shooting—Witnesses Tell of Shoemaker’s Crime Near Tenleytown,” *Evening Star*, March 1, 1894.

¹⁹⁰ “Interview at Rock Creek Baptist Church, August 2, 1977,” 3; United States Census, 1910.

assailant named Reese Grant, who claimed to have acted in self-defense. Taken to Georgetown University Hospital in critical condition, Frank survived, and in 1910 census officials found him living with his parents on Davenport Street.¹⁹¹

Helen Dixon worked as a washerwoman to support her family, while Eddie remembered that his father Aaron has worked in a stone quarry near Tenleytown. According to Eddie, Aaron had also done landscaping work on homes in Chevy Chase, trimming hedges and cutting lawns. The Dixons moved around Reno, Eddie remembered, living first on Donaldson, then Davenport, then Chesapeake, then Dennison.¹⁹² In 1930, census workers found that the Dixons had purchased a home at 3931 Dennison—a home valued at \$8,000, and to which Aaron had made a significant addition as recently as 1928. That census showed Aaron Sr. as a laborer, whereas Aaron Jr. had become a cement finisher.¹⁹³ Eddie remembered his family’s time in Reno fondly, recalling games of baseball, basketball, and tennis, swimming in the local creek, picnics, boating on the Potomac River, and straw rides “on a clapboard.” Like his father, Eddie found work in Chevy Chase, as a caddy at one of the local golf clubs. His family, he remembered, was “asked” by the government to move in 1930, “But we didn’t move ‘til 1935.”¹⁹⁴ By 1940, the Dixons had moved to 1227 Irving Street Northwest, where census officials found Aaron, Aaron Jr. and Helen living.¹⁹⁵

The picture that emerges from these sketches of family life in Reno is that of a close-knit community anchored by families that made their homes in the neighborhood for decades, knew each other well, and intermarried with frequency. Augusta Moore, who lived in Reno from 1902 through 1927, remembered that there was a fair amount of intermarriage between families in Reno and the Black community near Broad Branch Road, and that everyone knew one another through Rock Creek Baptist Church.¹⁹⁶ Families in Reno were large, and it was common for three generations to live within one house. Evidence shows that extended family stepped in during difficult situations, such as when Fred and Sarah Green took in the children of James L. and Esther Irene Warren during the rough patch in James and Esther’s marriage that occurred around the turn of the twentieth century. Likewise, Jennie Johnson Brown remembered that, after her grandfather’s death, her grandmother had left her home on Fessenden Street to come live with Brown and her parents on Chesapeake Street, choosing to rent out the “old house” on Fessenden. These

¹⁹¹ “Throat Slashed with Razor—Police Searching for Assailant of Francis Dixon, Colored,” *Washington Post*, October 19, 1904; United States Census, 1910. The *Post* article identified Chesapeake Street as “South Street,” its former name.

¹⁹² “Interview at Rock Creek Baptist Church,” 3–4.

¹⁹³ Notice of addition to house of Aaron Dixon, owner and builder, *Evening Star*, September 15, 1928; United States Census, 1930.

¹⁹⁴ “Interview at Rock Creek Baptist Church,” 4.

¹⁹⁵ United States Census, 1940.

¹⁹⁶ “Interview at Rock Creek Baptist Church,” 10.

were families who recorded their histories in the pages of family Bibles; several times, while testifying at a condemnation hearing in 1937, Brown struggled to remember the exact dates of births and deaths, and expressed frustration that, had she known she would have needed to answer questions of this kind, she would have brought her Bible: “I have it wrote down in the Bible.”¹⁹⁷

A sense of caring for those in need extended beyond the borders of family: one perusing Reno census entries will find multiple adopted daughters and sons taken in by Reno families over the years. Allen Lewis and his wife Mattie, who lived first on Howard Street and later purchased a home on Dennison, took in at least three adopted children, Ida, Lacey, and Sylvester, during their time in Reno; it is likely that other children listed as “boarders” in various census entries were living with the Lewises as foster children.¹⁹⁸ Morris and Lucinda Harper, likewise, took in an adopted daughter, Maitland, and it was she who handled the sale of their house, a two-story, 6-room brick dwelling at 3814 Davenport Street, to the NCPPC in 1940.¹⁹⁹ When asked about the sense of community in Reno, Eddie Dixon remembered that, “It was very, very strong, very close.”²⁰⁰

Organizational and Recreational Life in Reno

Reno’s organizational life also testified to the strong bonds that tied community members together. In the United States, the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were a golden age of associations, and Reno-dwellers displayed a penchant for joining together in fraternal, community-spirited organizations. One of the longest-running associations, “a colored fraternal society,” in the words of the *Evening Star*, was White’s Tabernacle, No. 39, of the Ancient United Order, Sons and Daughters, Brothers and Sisters of Moses (referred to hereafter as Moses Lodge), whose lodge stood behind Rock Creek Baptist Church.²⁰¹ Moses Lodge had acquired the land on which it built its lodge in 1885 and held onto it until 1944, when William Jackson, a surviving trustee and federal worker who had

¹⁹⁷ Brown’s testimony found in District Court Condemnation Case #2471, April 7, 1937, RG 21, Records of the District Courts of the United States, Entry 485, 105-111. Images available courtesy of Neil Flanagan.

¹⁹⁸ United States Census, 1900; United States Census, 1910; United States Census, 1920.

¹⁹⁹ Extract from Minutes of the 153rd Meeting of the NCPPC, September 19–20, 1940, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10, Fort Reno Park, Box 45, A1-E18; Maitland Washington, Land Purchase Contract, August 5, 1940, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10, Fort Reno Park, Box 45, A1-E18; Maitland Washington, NCPPC Questionnaire, December 5, 1940, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10, Fort Reno Park, Box 45, A1-E18; United States Census, 1920.

²⁰⁰ “Interview at Rock Creek Baptist Church,” 5.

²⁰¹ Quotation appears in “Affairs in Georgetown,” *Evening Star*, September 26, 1895. See also, “Interview at Rock Creek Baptist Church,” 25; Rotenstein, 44-45.

sold his house on Donaldson Place for nearly \$10,000 less than its 1930 census value, handled its sale to the NCPPC.²⁰² The Moses Lodge behind Rock Creek Baptist Church provided a space for community gatherings and socialization; Samuel Gorman, a white man who had grown up near Reno and whose family operated a grocery, Gorman Market, in the neighborhood, remembered watching dances at the lodge behind Rock Creek Baptist. “That’s where the colored people used to congregate . . . We used to watch them sometimes,” he recalled.²⁰³

Mary Daniel, who lived for many years on Donaldson Street, recalled that the Moses Lodge served more than purely social functions. The order, she said, was “religiously inclined” and held services—indeed, Rock Creek Baptist pastor William Armstead Jones was a trustee—but she also recalled receiving secretarial training there, and that the lodge ran programs aimed at area youth once a month.²⁰⁴ The lodge also hosted entertainments, at least one of which, in 1895, saw “a wordy war . . . [develop] into a physical combat in the house in which the entertainment was held.”²⁰⁵ Daniel remembered that Lodge members took organizational procedure seriously, and that members learned about points of parliamentary order and how to run organizations: “Take minutes, hold your meetings, be able to call your points of order.”²⁰⁶ The lodge had a cemetery, where many Reno-dwellers found their final resting place; Congress passed legislation in 1921 allowing the bodies to be removed and reinterred, and Mary Daniel remembered bodies being “dug up,” but no contemporaneous accounts of their removal and reinternment appear to exist.²⁰⁷ Calls for Lodge members to assemble for funeral ceremonies sometimes accompanied death notices for Reno-dwellers. In September 1928, Edward Frazier, a Moses Lodge trustee, co-signed a funeral notice for Sarah Green along with Sarah’s daughter, Gertrude Denman. The notice asked “[a]ll members” of White’s Tabernacle to assemble on September 26 “for a call meeting,” and to attend the funeral services for Green the next day

²⁰² William Jackson (Surviving Trustee), August 25, 1944, Land Purchase Contract, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10, Fort Reno Park, Box 46, A1-E18; William Jackson, Nannie Jackson and Clarence Jackson, February 27, 1936, Land Purchase Contract, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10, Fort Reno Park, Box 46, A1-E18; T.S. Settle to William Jackson, February 12, 1942, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10, Fort Reno Park, Box 46, A1-E18.

²⁰³ “Interview with Samuel Gorman, July 18, 1977.” Courtesy of Alcione Amos, Anacostia Community Museum. Original located at Washington DC Historical Society.

²⁰⁴ Indenture between John Hyson and William Jones, July 22, 1929, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 46, A1-E18.

²⁰⁵ “Affairs in Georgetown,” *Evening Star*, September 26, 1895.

²⁰⁶ “Interview at Rock Creek Baptist Church,” 25.

²⁰⁷ Daniel quoted in, “Interview at Rock Creek Baptist Church,” 26. See also, Notice of “bill permitting reinterment of bodies in the cemetery of White’s Tabernacle,” *Evening Star*, December 13, 1921; Rotenstein, “The River Road Moses Cemetery,” 54.

at Rock Creek Baptist, where William Armstead Jones would preside.²⁰⁸ It is likely that, like many fraternal organizations during this period, the Lodge served social insurance purposes and set aside a portion of dues to help members’ families when they fell upon hard times.

The Moses Lodge was one among many organizations which Reno residents either founded or took active part in. In 1899, Reno-dwellers and sisters Rosa Campbell and Lucinda Tolliver (soon to be married to Morris Harper), along with Catherine Graves, a longtime area resident herself, incorporated the first chapter of “The Tribe of the Old Folks Willing Workers Club,” whose aim was to “inculcate a spirit of charity and benevolence among its members.”²⁰⁹ Little seems to have come of this attempt to found a new benevolent order in Reno, but Reno residents took part in many existing public-spirited groups. A 1929 condemnation case involving Reno land to be used for the building of new schools included a parcel belonging to the Members of the Star of Bethlehem Good Samaritan Lodge, which included Clara Hebron, the widow of Mount Asbury Methodist Episcopal trustee Samuel Hebron, Lillian Neale, and Helen Dixon.²¹⁰ Funeral notices indicate that multiple Reno-dwellers and community members belonged to local Odd Fellows chapters, including Thornton Lewis, Walker Clark, and David Banks (a community leader and holder of multiple Reno properties who died in 1905).²¹¹ Although her Old Folks Willing Workers Club appears to have fallen by the wayside, its failure did not dim Lucinda Tolliver Harper’s associational spirit; when she died, three separate societies of which she was a member posted public notices regarding her funeral services, which were to be held at Florida Avenue Baptist Church: the Lincoln Lodge of the National Ideal Benefit Society, the Queen Rebecca Household of Ruth, and Lodge No. 102 of Narcissus Trent.²¹² Zachariah T. Thomas, president of the RCA, similarly extended himself beyond the Reno community, serving as a deacon of Lincoln Temple Congregational Church and, in 1908, taking part in an effort to found a summer camp for Black children.²¹³

²⁰⁸ Death notice for Sarah Jane Greene, *Evening Star*, September 24, 1928.

²⁰⁹ Quotation appeared in, “Articles of Incorporation,” *Evening Times*, August 12, 1899. See also, “Marriage Licenses Issued,” *Evening Times*, October 3, 1901.

²¹⁰ Members of the Star of Bethlehem Lodge 12, Independent Order of Good Samaritans and Daughters of Samarian, “Assignment,” February 12, 1931, RG 21, Condemnation Case 1972. Image courtesy of Neil Flanagan.

²¹¹ “David Banks’ Funeral,” *Evening Star*, June 26, 1905; Death notices for Thornton Lewis, *Evening Star*, December 25, 1927; Death notices for Walker Clark, *Evening Star*, August 1, 1923; “School Building Wanted,” *Evening Star*, February 21, 1898.

²¹² Death notices for Lucinda Harper, *Evening Star*, November 2, 1931. The Old Folks Willing Workers Club survived until at least October 1902, when the group, identified as the “Willing Working Club,” took part in ordination services at Rock Creek Baptist. See “Ordination Services,” *Evening Star*, October 28, 1902.

²¹³ “Annual Meeting Held—Election of Boards and Officers of Lincoln Temple Church,” *Evening Star*, March 1, 1906; “Camp Good Will Ready—Summer Outing Plans for Children Perfected,” *Washington Post*, June 29, 1908.

Aside from the public purposes that these various organizations and individuals espoused, community groups like the Moses Lodge also provided opportunities for socialization and entertainment; the local baseball team, the Fort Renos, did likewise. The Fort Reno squad competed against teams from other Black neighborhoods in the Washington area, and it seems to have been active mainly in the latter years of the first decade of the twentieth century, as well as the first years of the 1910s. The earliest located reference to the Fort Renos dates to 1905, when the “local Fort Reno nine” lost 18-3 to a team from Rockville.²¹⁴ It is unclear where this 1905 game took place, but an advertisement placed the next year suggested that at least some games took place at the Washington Senators’ park, Boundary Field (also known as American League Park), near the present-day location of Howard University Hospital. A notice inserted in the August 5, 1906 edition of the *Washington Post* identified the American, Quickstep, and Fort Reno teams as members of the Central League, “the only organization of negro ball players in the country,” and explained that these teams would be playing at American League Park during the coming week.²¹⁵ According to league standings published along with this notice, in addition to these clubs, the Central League contained four additional teams: Lafayette, Newberg, Rosslyn, and Western.²¹⁶

Accounts of games played by the Fort Reno nine against local teams appeared in local newspapers in 1907, 1908, and 1911. The Reno team apparently earned itself something of a local reputation, as a 1908 *Washington Herald* piece referred to the squad as “the crack Fort Reno team,” but its best surviving result is a game in which it played the local Belmont team to an 8–8 tie. All the other games whose accounts or box scores made their way into local newspapers were losses. The last mention of the Renos came in 1911, when the *Evening Star* carried news of their 11–5 defeat at the hands of the Le Droit Tigers.²¹⁷ In addition to the 1906 notice that identified the Fort Renos as part of the Central League, a 1907 notice suggested that the Renos were one among a number of local teams that

²¹⁴ Notice of baseball game between Fort Reno and Rockville, *Washington Times*, July 16, 1905. There is a notice of a game played in May 1903 in which “the Reno nine” lost to the “the St. Alban’s” team by a score of 6 to 4. This notice appeared in an article entitled “Junior Baseball.” It does not seem that the Black baseball team the Fort Renos were a junior baseball team, and there is nothing in this 1903 article to indicate that the “Reno nine” was a team of Black players. The author considers it doubtful that these are the same team, but the possibility surely exists. See “Junior Base Ball,” *Evening Star*, June 1, 1903.

²¹⁵ “Griffith Stadium,” *Project Ballpark*, accessed May 8, 2020, <http://www.projectballpark.org/history/al/griffith.html>; Untitled notice, *Washington Post*, August 5, 1906.

²¹⁶ “Standing of the Clubs,” *Evening Star*, August 5, 1906. From these standings, we know, too, that the Fort Renos won some games, as their record on August 5 of that year was 2–4.

²¹⁷ Quotation appeared in “Piedmonts Continue to Win,” *Washington Herald*, June 5, 1908. See also, Notice of game between Le Droit Tigers and Fort Renos, July 4, 1911.

regularly played one another as, having tied the Renos, Thomas Johnson of the Belmonts listed several other teams his squad wished to play, including the Anacostia Tigers, Garfields, and Colored Americans.²¹⁸

Fort Reno was also, apparently, the site of unregistered boxing matches staged by Black promoters. An August 1897 notice in the *Evening Star* explained that police had learned of a boxing tournament planned to be held “at Campbell’s Grove, on the heights just back of Fort Reno.” Albert Johnson, whom the *Star* identified as “a local colored light in the pugilistic world,” was to have been the “projector” of the tournament, and “quite a number of people” had gone to see the fights, but officers would not permit the fights to proceed as scheduled. Those assembled had to settle for “an exhibition of bag punching instead.”²¹⁹

The Reno Citizens’ Association

The most important organization to take shape in Reno was the RCA, which dates to at least 1913.²²⁰ The RCA met monthly and performed several functions.²²¹ One of its duties was to monitor the condition of local infrastructure and lobby District officials for improvements. The RCA directed its lobbying efforts to the board of District Commissioners who had ruled the city since 1874, when a white-led movement for reorganization of the District’s government, motivated by white conservatives’ desire to disempower Black voters, disenfranchised District residents in favor of government by a three-person board of Congressional appointees. For the RCA, getting the Commissioners’ attention was no small task: Washington would not see the appointment of a Black District Commissioner until 1961, and in the intervening decades, the Commissioners developed a reputation for ignoring the concerns of local Black communities. Under the watch of the all-white board of Commissioners, African Americans were routinely denied city jobs and contracts, and anti-Black police brutality increased.²²²

²¹⁸ “Belmonts Want Games,” *Evening Star*, June 9, 1907.

²¹⁹ “Boxing Tournament Forbidden,” *Evening Star*, August 25, 1897.

²²⁰ The earliest located reference to the Reno Citizens’ Association came in a *Washington Herald* article published in October 1911. It appeared in a seemingly satirical section of the newspaper entitled “The Big Stick.” In a subsection of “The Big Stick” entitled “Notes on the World’s Series,” the *Herald* claimed that, “The Fort Reno (DC) Citizens’ Association attended the New York game in a body. They were awakened at the conclusion of the ninth inning and gently led home. All had a fine time.” This piece is interesting because it seemed to mock Reno’s citizens, but not in a racially charged way, necessarily. Rather, the joke here seemed to be that Reno was a sleepy suburb populated by men and women who could not attend a baseball game without falling asleep.

²²¹ “Report on Fort Reno Needs,” *Washington Herald*, November 21, 1913. The *Herald* referred to the October 1913 meeting of the RCA as its “monthly meeting.”

²²² Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 156–168, 173.

Despite the obstacles to having their concerns taken seriously, the RCA persevered and achieved some success. At their November 1913 meeting, RCA members concerned themselves with school affairs, and Chainey Becks was appointed head of a committee charged with consulting school officials regarding the “immediate needs of the Jesse Lee Reno School.” RCA members created a number of other committees which testified to their concern with monitoring the state of public services and infrastructure in their neighborhood, including committees on “streets, sidewalks, sewers, water, and lights,” “legislation and mail” (this committee was headed by Hugh Denman, who also served as the meeting’s chaplain), and “health and sanitation.”²²³ In February 1915, Thornton Lewis, RCA vice president and the head of a committee on improvements in Reno, reported on the RCA’s petition to the District Commissioners, which he and Z. T. Thomas had delivered in person. The Commissioners had promised to macadamize Davenport Street in the coming spring and to make temporary improvements on Howard Street, pending the acquisition of funds that would allow that road to be macadamized as well. The Commissioners pledged to look after the remaining requests made by the RCA, which had included streetlights, road signs at intersections, and correct house numbers.²²⁴ In meetings over the next few years, RCA members discussed the need for guardrails on local streets, new lights in the Reno School, and further improvements on Reno roads. At a 1916 meeting, several speakers, including Rock Creek Baptist pastor William Armstead Jones, addressed the importance of the RCA to the community, and, clearly, a large part of its value came in ensuring that Fort Reno received its fair share of municipal services and improvements.²²⁵ As late as 1927, when the campaign to clear and convert Reno had gained significant momentum, the RCA was making plans to lobby the District Commissioners for improved street, water, and lighting facilities.²²⁶

The RCA also lobbied for policy changes geared toward making everyday life easier for the many Reno residents who tried to make ends meet on the modest wages they earned as day laborers, domestics, janitors, butlers, and chauffeurs. At a February 1916 meeting, speakers identified the high cost of textbooks as a principal reason why many local students failed to complete their educations, and suggested that the District possessed a duty to its students to provide them with free educations, and educational supplies such as textbooks,

²²³ “Needs of Fort Reno—Discussed at November Meeting of the Citizens’ Association,” *Evening Star*, November 20, 1913.

²²⁴ Thornton Lewis and Z. T. Thomas to District Commissioners, February 10, 1915, Engineer Department File No. 123768, District of Columbia Archives; Oliver P. Newman, “Memorandum for Major Kutz,” February 12, 1915, Engineer Department File No. 123768, District of Columbia Archives. Both images courtesy of Neil Flanagan. See also “Reno Association Meets,” *Evening Star*, February 14, 1915.

²²⁵ “Guard Rail is Urged—Citizens Want One at McPherson and Chesapeake Streets,” *Evening Star*, October 14, 1916; “Needs of Reno School Discussed by Citizens,” *Evening Star*, November 11, 1916; “Reno Citizens Choose Z. T. Thomas President,” *Evening Star*, January 14, 1916; “Reno Citizens Elect Officers,” *Evening Star*, September 22, 1917.

²²⁶ “Ask Better Facilities,” *Evening Star*, April 14, 1927.

up through high school.²²⁷ The RCA’s request for lights for the Reno School was related to its members’ desire to hold night classes, and that request came alongside a request for the Board of Education to open a kindergarten in Reno; surely, this request resulted from RCA members’ desire to see their children start their educational careers as early as possible, but also to provide child care for local families, many of which saw both parents, or multiple generations, working for their support.²²⁸ A May 1917 community garden movement in Reno was not officially sponsored by the RCA, but multiple RCA members participated. It was spearheaded by 144 students at the Reno School who had started plots and included “nearly ten acres of fertile land” that Herndon B. Jones, a teacher at the Reno School, had apportioned among the neighborhood’s residents according to family size. The garden movement was likely intended to aid in community beautification, but its stated purpose was to make “war” on “high living cost[s]” in the District.²²⁹ Two years later, with high living costs undoubtedly still on their minds, the members of the RCA voted their support for higher pay for “teachers, janitors and all underpaid employe[e]s of the District.”²³⁰ Members of the RCA recognized that many local families scraped and saved to support themselves, and they supported government programs and community initiatives that would ease the burdens on working-class families. In endorsing these policies, Reno citizens would seem to have aligned themselves with Progressive activists and politicians of the day who called for municipalities to provide their residents with expanded services; so far as is known, however, no one in Reno consciously adopted the term “Progressive” to describe his or her political orientation or the policies he or she wished to see enacted.

Although they often focused on matters relating to local infrastructure or finance, RCA members also spoke out against racism and segregation. Washington, DC was a segregated city whose separation between blacks and whites was “uneven and quirky, a confusing array of unwritten customs rather than formal laws.” Segregation in the District

²²⁷ “Favor Free Text Books,” *Evening Star*, February 11, 1916.

²²⁸ “Needs of Reno School Discussed by Citizens,” *Evening Star*, November 11, 1916. The Reno School did begin hosting night classes the following year. A notice included in the *Evening Star* in October 1917 advertised a night class on the “domestic arts” that would be held at the Reno School. The class had been opened “to meet requests from persons in the vicinity of the Fort Reno building.” See “City News in Brief,” *Evening Star*, October 31, 1917. The Reno School’s night class offerings eventually included home cooking, institutional cooking, and dressmaking. See “Urges Colored Girls to Be Aided,” *Washington Herald*, October 6, 1920.

²²⁹ “To Apportion Ten Acres in Community Farms—New High Living Cost War Planned by Reno Residents,” *Washington Times*, May 14, 1917. The Times correspondent who wrote this article did not specify where this “nearly ten acres of fertile land” was located. If it was in Reno, it would have accounted for about one-fifth of the subdivision. A subsequent Times article, however, talked of “Thirty-six residents of Fort Reno, DC, all interested in the community garden maintained there,” who would be participating in a gardening contest sponsored by the newspaper. This strongly implied that the garden was indeed in Reno proper. Reno-dwellers with plots in the community garden included Edward Dixon—almost certainly the same Eddie Dixon interviewed by Woodrow Wilson students in the 1970s—Samuel Hebron, Morris Harper, Ed Warren, and Helen Prather. See “Thirty-Six Will Try for Times’ Garden Prizes,” *Washington Times*, May 27, 1917.

²³⁰ “Favors DC Suffrage—Reno Citizens’ Association Pledges Aid to Further the Cause,” *Evening Star*, March 14, 1919.

increased with the election of a Southern Democrat, Woodrow Wilson, to the presidency in 1912, and segregation and racism were both national political issues.²³¹ Fort Reno citizens engaged with these pressing matters. In February 1915, RCA members protested “‘Jim Crow’ street cars” and laws that required Black and white passengers to sit in separate cars, resolving that the practice was “unnecessary,” and that “people should not be subjected to such inconveniences to satisfy the prejudices of a narrow-minded few.”²³² The following year, the RCA passed a resolution opposing the screening of *Birth of a Nation*—D.W. Griffith’s virulently racist cinematic take on Reconstruction, which villainized former slaves and lionized Ku Klux Klan terrorists—in any District theater. The RCA’s secretary was instructed to protest the film to the District Commissioners.²³³ In 1919, RCA members protested their disenfranchisement, announcing their support for granting suffrage to District residents and pledging “to do all in their power to further the cause.”²³⁴ Nearly a decade later, as at the RCA’s last known meeting in 1928 members were mobilizing to stop the planned effort to clear their community, they paused to again address the issue of streetcar discrimination. At this meeting, residents deferred action on the proposed condemnation of Reno, but deputized Moses Lodge trustee Edward Frazier and John Scott’s son Frank to complain to the Public Utilities Commission regarding the failure of buses run by the Chevy Chase Deluxe Company to stop for Reno citizens.²³⁵ Their fight to save their homes had not sapped their will to insist on equal treatment.

If the RCA’s embrace of higher pay for city employees and state-supported education suggested its sympathies with certain elements of the Progressive movement, its opposition to segregation placed it at odds with Progressive leaders who viewed segregation as an orderly solution to race relations in Southern communities. This segregation-friendly wing of the Progressive movement included Woodrow Wilson, who famously screened *Birth of a Nation* at the White House.²³⁶ Wilson’s election had a powerful impact on Black federal workers, as for two terms members of his administration effected an “uneven but ultimately successful effort to segregate the federal workforce.” Under Wilson, federal administrators often declined to hire or promote Black workers, wrote negative performance reviews for Black employees, and used the interview process and photo requirements to discriminate against Black applicants. In so doing, the Wilson administration made it difficult for African Americans to secure positions within the federal civil

²³¹ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 220–222, 246.

²³² “Reno Association Meets—Resolutions Adopted Opposing Liquor Traffic,” *Evening Star*, February 14, 1915.

²³³ “Protest Made Against ‘Birth of a Nation’ Film,” *Evening Star*, March 11, 1916.

²³⁴ “Favors DC Suffrage—Reno Citizens’ Association Pledges Aid to Further the Cause,” *Evening Star*, March 14, 1919.

²³⁵ “Plan Bus Complaint.”

²³⁶ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 395–397.

service, narrowing one of the few viable routes to economic advancement open to Black residents of the nation’s capital.²³⁷ Although most Reno residents worked outside the federal government, numerous Reno-dwellers had secured positions within the federal service, and they cannot have been unaware of the Wilson administration’s hostility to Black workers; when asked about the segregation he had dealt with in the Washington of his youth, Eddie Dixon remembered that “segregation was from the government, see. The . . . government had it.”²³⁸ Viewed in this context, the RCA’s protests must be seen not only as condemnations of racism and discrimination, but of white supremacist politicians like Woodrow Wilson who embraced segregation and promoted discriminatory practices.

Indeed, RCA president Zachariah T. Thomas took Reno citizens’ quest for racial justice to the highest legislature in the land, writing directly to Wesley L. Jones, a Republican senator from Washington state, to thank him for his opposition to the Smith-Lever Agricultural Extension Bill. The legislation was designed to cut off private funding to state colleges for agricultural education programs, leaving states as the sole distributors of aid; Black leaders worried that the law would allow white supremacist Southerners to deny needed fund to Black-run schools and refuse to employ hire Black men and women as agricultural extension agents. Working alongside the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Jones had offered an amendment designed to make the bill less discriminatory. Writing from his home on Howard Street, Thomas thanked Jones for the “strong, manly fight” he had made on the Senate floor. Thomas seemed to speak for the RCA even though he did not mention his role as its president in the letter: “We believe,” he stated plainly, “that the framers of this bill [Democrats Hoke Smith of Georgia and Asbury Lever of South Carolina] are unjust and dishonest, their intention being to deliberately discriminate against the black man.” Thomas scoffed at the idea that white men could do more for Black Americans than Black Americans could do for themselves, pointing to the “wicked discrimination of . . . white men against the black children of the South.” Thomas explained that “The black man is in no humor to be baffled. We are not going to sit idly and allow men of the Hoke Smith, [Mississippi senator James K.] Vardaman type to put their hands in the public treasury and appropriate for their own selfish and dishonest purposes, moneys that our fathers and mothers labored for and moneys that we are now contributing for the support of this government.” If Southern Democrats of the “Hoke Smith, Vardaman type” were allowed to pursue their “wicked policies” unchecked, they would “bring destruction. . . upon the heads of all the people of

²³⁷ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 225.

²³⁸ “Interview at Rock Creek Baptist Church,” 21.

this country.”²³⁹ Although Jones’ amendment was defeated, the NAACP’s campaign to modify the Smith-Lever Bill met with some success; nevertheless, racial discrimination marred defined the act’s implementation across the Southern states.

Thomas saw in the Republican Wesley Jones an ally, and scattered additional evidence suggests, unsurprisingly, that Reno-dwellers rejected Wilson’s Democratic Party, which had for decades been identified with white Southern voters, in favor of the Republican Party. In January 1912, an item in the *Evening Star* referred to the W. Calvin Chase Republican Club, which had met at Fort Reno recently and “which ha[d] taken part in local politics since 1900.” The club had met to endorse William Howard Taft for that year’s presidential election and to endorse delegates to the upcoming Republican national convention.²⁴⁰ That the club that met at Reno was named after W. Calvin Chase was significant; Chase was the editor of the *Washington Bee*, and he had emerged in the final decades of the nineteenth century as the main rival to the powerful Perry Carson, a Black leader of working-class origins. Many “elite Black leaders,” who crusaded against white racism, Chris Meyers Acsh and Derek Musgrove have explained, were also embarrassed by Carson’s political rallies, “raucous affairs full of theatrical oratory, intense lobbying, and the occasional physical flare-up,” feeling that Carson’s brand of politics “reinforced the negative stereotypes that white people held about black politics” and thus served as an obstacle to the movement for District suffrage. Indeed, according to Acsh and Musgrove, Carson and Chase “personified” the political split within the District’s Black community.²⁴¹ That the Chase Republican Club met at Fort Reno suggested participation in the group by Reno-dwellers, but neither of the officers listed in the 1912 item on the club, William Scott and Lewis Moore, appear to have lived in Reno or been involved with the RCA. The apparently Reno-based club’s leadership was indicative of the ties that Reno’s residents had forged to other Black neighborhoods in the District, and its identification with Chase suggests Reno-dwellers’ cultivation of a respectable brand of politics in line with the image that the RCA sought to project of the neighborhood and its inhabitants.²⁴²

²³⁹ Quotations from Zachariah T. Thomas to Wesley L. Jones, February 7, 1914. Image courtesy of Neil Flanagan. Original located at National Archives; Carmen V. Harris, “‘The Extension Service is not an Integration Agency’: The Idea of Race in the Cooperative Extension Service,” *Agricultural History*, Spring 2008, Vol. 82, no. 2, 194-201.

²⁴⁰ “La Follette Men Uninterested,” *Evening Star*, January 28, 1912. The ticket that the Chase club endorsed, composed of Chase and Leonard Bradshaw, was victorious in the Republican primary held in the next month, but not without some drama emanating from Fort Reno. According to the *Evening Star*, “What became of the bread box that did duty as a depository of the people’s votes at Fort Reno is a deep and dark mystery. It never showed up at 602 F Street,” where ballots had been counted. See “Bradshaw-Chase Ticket Victorious,” *Evening Star*, February 11, 1912. The next day, the Reno ballot box had still not turned up, and the *Star* declared that the box had been buried “as deep from sight as any of the famous Portuguese chests of Capt. Kidd and the buccaneers of the Spanish main.” See “Back to Anacostia,” *Evening Star*, February 12, 1912.

²⁴¹ Acsh and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 178, 180–181

²⁴² “La Follette Men Uninterested,” *Evening Star*, January 28, 1912.

The RCA sought to portray Fort Reno’s inhabitants as upstanding, respectable members of the Washington community. Their December 1913 embrace of prohibitionist politics, in addition to representing a sincere reaction to the damage wrought by alcoholism on families and communities, allowed the RCA to project an image of temperance and sobriety. At that month’s meeting, they objected to plans to build an “inebriate asylum” within the District, commending the Anti-Saloon League’s “fight against the liquor traffic.”²⁴³ Similarly, in 1915, RCA members took an opportunity to display their civic-minded spirit and claim their place as citizens by contributing to the city’s planned July Fourth festivities. Joining a lengthy list of corporations and individuals who had already contributed, RCA president Zachariah Thomas had notified District Commissioner Oliver P. Newman that Reno citizens had created a three-person committee to raise contributions.²⁴⁴ Another way to communicate refinement was through the musical performances that RCA meetings frequently included.²⁴⁵ The RCA also sought out guest speakers to give talks on matters of public importance. In this vein, at the same meeting where they denounced *Birth of a Nation*, the members of the RCA were treated to lectures on “Health and Sanitation” by Dr. Charles H. Marshall, a former member of the District Board of Education, and “Preparedness for health and warfare against disease,” by Dr. W. E. Lewis.²⁴⁶ In February 1917, members of the RCA gathered in St. Mark’s Church in Reno to celebrate the life of Frederick Douglass and, at the meeting, a Reverend Reed urged the young men and women of the community to profit by Douglass’s example and do their parts “toward fighting and solving the many problems that confront the race.”²⁴⁷ In November of that same year, the RCA held a dinner at which “colored soldiers [were] to be the guests of honor at the Reno School”; the timing of the dinner suggested that the soldiers being honored were in training and headed out to France as part of the American Expeditionary Force, and it is likely that at least some of the Black troops in attendance were Reno residents or related to Reno-dwellers.²⁴⁸

Members of the RCA saw themselves as representatives of Washington’s African American community, and they sought to highlight their respectability, public-spiritedness, patriotism, and determination to confront the problems that dogged African Americans as the twentieth century dawned. For nearly two decades, the RCA remained an active concern, and its members dealt with issues of vital interest to the Reno community as well as

²⁴³ “Reno Citizens Protest—Adopt Resolutions Opposing Inebriate Asylum in District,” *Evening Star*, December 17, 1913.

²⁴⁴ “July Fourth Fund Now Totals \$830,” *Washington Times*, June 21, 1915.

²⁴⁵ “Reno Citizens Choose Z. T. Thomas President,” *Evening Star*, January 14, 1916; “Special Services Held—Reno Citizens’ Association Honors Memory of Frederick Douglass,” *Evening Star*, February 16, 1917.

²⁴⁶ “Protest Made Against ‘Birth of a Nation’ Film,” *Evening Star*, March 11, 1916.

²⁴⁷ “Special Services Held.”

²⁴⁸ “The Town Crier,” *Washington Herald*, November 29, 1917.

matters that affected the African American community generally. The RCA’s activity appears to have dropped off in the late 1920s, as Reno came under increasingly unrelenting assault from local developers and government officials. The last located newspaper notice of an RCA meeting ran in a February 1928 edition of the *Evening Star*. At this meeting, “citizens” of Reno sought street improvements and “deferred until a later meeting. . . . Action on condemnation of the Fort Reno division.”²⁴⁹

Respectability, Racism, and Reno

Through the activities of the RCA, and the organizational life of Reno more generally, we can glimpse the connections that Reno-dwellers developed with other Black communities in and around Washington. Numerous prominent Black Washingtonians, many with ties to Howard University, ventured to Reno for speaking engagements during the early decades of the twentieth century. Charles H. Shorter, a Civil War veteran and a trustee of the District’s Colored Union Benevolent Association (a Black fraternal organization that had founded the Mount Pleasant Plains Cemetery in 1870), addressed the pupils of the Reno School in 1906 to commemorate the observance of Flag Day.²⁵⁰ Six years later, the Reno School hosted C. R. Richardson, who delivered an address on George Washington’s birthday. Richardson was a graduate of Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute and Howard Law School. Shortly after he delivered this speech, he left Washington for Indiana; he eventually served as US Commissioner to the Virgin Islands under President Calvin Coolidge, and in 1956 he was appointed honorary vice president of the Republican National Convention.²⁵¹ At an April 1916 meeting, the RCA brought in Roscoe C. Bruce and Professor Charles Thomas as speakers.²⁵² Bruce, whose father, Blanche K. Bruce, had been the second formerly enslaved person to serve in the US Senate, had attended Philips Exeter and Harvard; he was a close ally of Booker T. Washington and former academic director of Washington’s Tuskegee Institute, and he had returned to his native Washington to work as an assistant superintendent of the District’s Black schools.²⁵³ Thomas worked at the Myrtilla Miner

²⁴⁹ “Plan Bus Complaint.”

²⁵⁰ Mark Mack and Mary Belcher, “The Archaeological Investigation of Walter C. Pierce Community Park and Vicinity, 2005–2012; Report to the Public, May 2013,” 39; “The Benevolent Association, 1838–1923,” *Walter Pierce Park Cemeteries*, available <https://walterpierceparkcemeteries.org/the-free-young-mens-colored-union-benevolent-association>; “Story of Old Glory,” *Evening Star*, June 13, 1906.

²⁵¹ “Among the Schools,” *Evening Star* February 25, 1912; “Cornelius Roscoe Richardson (1886-1964),” Morrisson-Reeves Library, available <http://www.mrlinfo.org/history/biography/richardsoncr.htm>.

²⁵² “Observe Emancipation Day—Reno Citizens’ Association Give a Musical and Literary Program, *Evening Star*, April 16, 1916.

²⁵³ E. Renne Ingram, “Roscoe Conkling Bruce, Sr.,” in *Harlem Renaissance Lives from the African American National Biography*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 84–86.

Normal School, founded in 1851, which had become the leading preparatory institution for Black women seeking teaching careers in Washington’s public schools.²⁵⁴ Bruce lectured RCA members about the importance of the “The Education of the Body, Mind and Heart,” whereas Thomas addressed his remarks to “The Practical Problems of the Neighborhood.”²⁵⁵ Other speakers the RCA hosted during its heyday included John Whitelaw Lewis, a Black banker and hotelier who founded the Whitelaw Hotel in 1919 and spoke on “Preparedness for Business,” and Coralie F. Cook.²⁵⁶ Cook addressed the group in October 1917, though the topic of her address is lost to history; she was a descendant of Brown Colbert, a man enslaved by Thomas Jefferson at Monticello, and had been born enslaved herself. A staunch advocate of women’s suffrage, she had helped found the National Association of Colored Women in 1910, and she taught elocution at Howard University alongside her husband George Cook, a Howard professor and trustee. George Cook also addressed the RCA in 1917.²⁵⁷

In 1919, Captain T. Edward Jones regaled members of the RCA with stories of his time serving with the American Expeditionary Force in France during the First World War.²⁵⁸ Jones was a Howard-educated physician who, before and after his time in France, practiced at Washington’s Freedman’s Hospital, the predecessor to the Howard University Hospital; while in France, Jones’s bravery under fire earned him the Croix de Guerre, the Distinguished Service Cross, and a promotion to the rank of captain, making him one of the few Black commissioned officers in the World War I-era US Army.²⁵⁹ Jones knew Reno well as, while he was working as a government watchman and putting himself through medical school, he had lived on Davenport Street with his wife Leonie.²⁶⁰ Even after he had moved elsewhere, Jones continued to own property in Reno, and he remained connected to his former home, explaining in 1926 that he continued to see patients in Reno and thus knew homes in the neighborhood “inside and out.” Indeed, death certificates indicate that Jones served as attending physician to both Fred and Sarah Green at their deaths, and Jones’ connection to the neighborhood led him to testify before a congressional

²⁵⁴ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 215–216.

²⁵⁵ “Observe Emancipation Day.”

²⁵⁶ “Whitelaw African American Heritage Trail,” *Cultural Tourism DC*, available <https://www.culturaltourismdc.org/portal/whitelaw-hotel-african-american-heritage-trail>; “J. W. Lewis Addresses Reno Citizens,” June 16, 1916.

²⁵⁷ “Coralie Franklin Cook,” *Monticello.org*, available <https://www.monticello.org/getting-word/people/coralie-franklin-cook>; “Reno Citizens Discuss Activities,” *Evening Star*, October 19, 1917

²⁵⁸ Untitled notice, *Evening Star*, April 18, 1919.

²⁵⁹ “Thomas Edward Jones,” in *African American Doctors of World War I: The Lives of 104 Volunteers*, ed. W. Douglas Fisher and Joann H. Buckley (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016), 124–126.

²⁶⁰ United States Census, 1910.

subcommittee in 1926 to oppose the effort to clear Reno.²⁶¹ It seems likely that RCA members sought out speakers like Jones, Coralie Cook, and Roscoe Bruce because they could give interesting, instructive addresses, but also because they could communicate the respectability of Reno’s residents; a community organization with connections to the professional class that comprised Washington’s Black elite must be worthy of esteem.

Concern with projecting an image of competence and respectability underlaid associational activities in Reno. One proof of this concern lay in Reno citizens’ attention to order and regular procedure. Accounts of RCA meetings nearly always spoke of votes taken, committee reports prepared and given, and officers elected. As mentioned above, Mary Daniel remembered that the Brothers and Sisters of Moses Lodge took great interest in parliamentary procedure and regular order as well.²⁶² Even at community meetings that took place outside the umbrella of established organizations, such procedures seem to have been observed; when “the citizens of Reno” met at the Moses Lodge in February 1916 to present their choice for the slate of delegates to represent Black Washingtonians at the 1916 Republican convention, they elected a presiding officer, secretary, treasurer, sergeant-at-arms, and chaplain.²⁶³ John Ernest has argued that, going back to the Black state and national convention movements of the nineteenth century, African Americans engaged in public activities placed high importance on order and decorum because they saw these gatherings as a means by which they could counteract white depictions of Black incompetence.²⁶⁴ When Reno citizens met—under the auspices of the RCA, Moses Lodge, or some other group—they surely had matters of vital importance to the community to discuss; it seems that they also sought to convey a general sense of respectability, to show that they could embody middle-class notions of virtue, sobriety, and order.

Such a concern likely explained, at least in part, why community leaders sought out Christian Fleetwood to participate in the opening of Reno School in 1903, or why, when condemned murderer Nelson Vale asked to have his funeral service conducted at Rock Creek Baptist Church, of which he had been a member, church leaders refused.²⁶⁵ Similarly, local vigilantes mobilized to banish Mary Ellis (the young housekeeper who had lived with Nelson Vale and over whom Vale and his victim, Alexander Jackson, had quarreled) from Reno. Ellis had allegedly been the cause of numerous fights before the murder—“all of the

²⁶¹ Jones quoted in *Acquirement of Reno Subdivision*, 19–20. See also, Frederick Greene, Death Certificate, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500–10, Fort Reno Park, Box 45, A1-E18; Sarah Jane Greene, Death Certificate, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500–10, Fort Reno Park, Box 45, A1-E18.

²⁶² “Interview at Rock Creek Baptist Church,” 25.

²⁶³ “Action of Reno Citizens,” *Evening Star*, February 23, 1916.

²⁶⁴ John Ernest, *A Nation Within a Nation: Organizing African-American Communities Before the Civil War* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 2011).

²⁶⁵ Burial of Nelson Vale, *Evening Star*, July 9, 1900.

young colored men in the neighborhood, it is said, were more or less jealous” of Vale and his relationship with Ellis, the *Evening Star* claimed—and community leaders appear to have worried that, if allowed to remain in the community, she would continue to cause trouble, bringing further negative attention to Fort Reno. Thus, the “law-abiding citizens” of Tenleytown delivered to Ellis a letter signed by “whitecaps,” which gave her “a certain time in which to permanently leave the locality.” Ellis, alarmed, showed the letter to the police, but, perhaps learning that “several citizens of Tenleytown . . . [had] reached the conclusion to take drastic measures to accomplish the purpose . . . in the event the woman failed to heed the warning,” she complied with the anonymous letter’s demand. By February 1900, she had left Tenleytown, and, later that year, census officials found her living with her father, Alexander, outside of Reno proper, on Albemarle Street.²⁶⁶ Residents of Reno possessed a strong sense of community, throwing open their doors to those in need, but, in extreme circumstances, they would also mobilize to expel those they deemed to be troublemakers, or who brought unwanted attention to the neighborhood.

A survey of local newspapers’ coverage of happenings in Fort Reno reveals depictions of Reno as squalid and vice-ridden, which Reno-dwellers sought to counteract through their civic activities. As will be detailed in the following chapter, from the late 1890s, local white citizens’ associations argued that Reno was a blight on the northwest corner of Washington, its residents’ lack of hygiene a threat to the city’s water supply and the health of surrounding neighborhoods. City newspapers also dwelt on crime in Reno. The Nelson Vale murder and its salacious details occupied more city-wide attention than anything else that happened in Reno during its decades of existence, but Washington newspapers carried news of fights and other illicit activity in and around Reno with some regularity. Reno was a working-class neighborhood in a time when violence was more common than it is in the present day, and it saw its share of fights and altercations; one such melee took place in June 1905, when James Owens, a Black man who ran a barbershop in Reno, “got on a soap box outside his barber shop and began to lecture the colored men for spending their money on women, instead of . . . real estate. Some of the men took exception to his remarks . . . and there came near being a riot.”²⁶⁷ Washington newspapers also, of course, reported on similar outbursts involving whites, but when they covered altercations between African Americans in Reno, they sometimes did so in a mocking tone that suggested racist ideas about Black capacity and morality, and in language that implied that

²⁶⁶ “Affairs in Georgetown,” *Evening Star*, January 25, 1900; United States Census, 1900.

²⁶⁷ “Tenleytown Excited over Real Arrest,” *Washington Times*, June 25, 1905. As seen below, Washington newspapers sometimes treated African Americans as subjects fit for derision. In this case, though, the target of the press’ ridicule was the Tenleytown Police Department, which, according to the *Times*, was not known for making arrests: “Sound trumpets and awaken Tenleytown for as true as the stars shine police of the subpolice station actually made an arrest and prisoner deposited \$5 collateral, the first real money that has been in the safe since the station was established about a year ago.” Owens did not own a home in Fort Reno; rather, he rented a room in a home owned by Lillie Russell on Davenport Street. See “Two Sudden Deaths,” *Evening Star*, October 29, 1907.

African Americans were predisposed to engaging in such behavior. In June 1893, for example, the *Evening Star* reported on a “colored picnic at Campbell’s Grove, near Fort Reno,” that was “wound . . . up” by the “usual fight.”²⁶⁸ The next year, the *Star* reported on “five strong, healthy-looking colored men of Tenleytown [who] were dissatisfied with their financial position in life.” The *Star* explained derisively that, “instead of making a ladder of their dissatisfaction,” the five had gathered in a vacant house in Fort Reno and “sat down in the squalor of it and tried to do each other in a semi-legitimate way through the assistance of a pack of cards and a clever manipulation.” The five men were arrested and, the *Star* reported, “The little crowd was brought down [to the police station] on an electric car.”²⁶⁹ This report was exceeded in ugliness by the *Washington Post*’s reporting on Jeremiah “Jerry” Botts’s arrest for stealing chickens from a local farmer in 1903. According to the *Post*’s reporter, Botts had whistled “Ah Loves Ma Chicken,” as he had broken into the chicken coop, and had slipped away thinking that “all was well and the Sunday dinner was well assured.” Botts, who lived with his wife Cora on Sherman Street, worshipped at Rock Creek Baptist Church, and worked as a janitor in one of the District’s public schools, was arrested the next day. “His lamentations in the cell last night,” reported the *Post*, “were equaled only by the Jeremiah of old.”²⁷⁰ Although many articles carried in city newspapers reported on happenings in Reno without resorting to such demeaning, disrespectful tones, the appearance of items such as those quoted above can only have reminded Reno’s African American residents of the depths of white racism and the powerful stereotypes they needed to combat.

Race Relations in Reno

Newspaper coverage aside, evidence exists to suggest that relations between Reno’s Black residents and whites living in Reno were relatively friendly. While by the early twentieth century Reno was primarily known as a center of Black population in the northwest quadrant of Washington, Black and white residents of Reno always lived in proximity. When interviewed decades later, Black residents of Reno remembered being on good terms with their white neighbors. In preparation for her history of Tenleytown, Judith Beck Helm interviewed Mary Thomas. Thomas’ father Ethelbert had purchased land in Reno in 1883, and he had married her mother Fenton two years later. Ethelbert died in 1903, but Mary, who worked as a printer’s assistant, and her sister Mabel, a maid, lived with their mother in Reno into the 1920s, and they were eventually able to purchase a home on Donaldson

²⁶⁸ “How Summerville Defended His Castle,” *Evening Star*, June 14, 1893.

²⁶⁹ “Affairs in Georgetown—Playing Cards as an Aid in Cases of Poverty,” *Evening Star*, March 6, 1894.

²⁷⁰ “School Janitor a Prisoner,” *Washington Post*, January 18, 1903.

Street, where they lived into the 1930s, at which point their dwelling was the “Only house left in [the] block . . . occupied by Colored.”²⁷¹ Mary had been an active member of the RCA and had in 1917 apparently taken a leadership role in the formation of the Reno Junior Citizens’ Association, for children “who [were] learning the management of civic affairs and who [would] assist in the improvement of community conditions.”²⁷² Mary remembered that, among Reno’s residents, “Everybody was like one big family, Black and white together. There was no hatred.”²⁷³

When interviewed in the 1970s, both Augusta Moore and Mary Daniel confirmed that there had been little friction between Reno’s Black and white citizens. Moore explained:

Here was a white family named Fagan. Here was a family named Hurdle. Here was my mother’s family. Here was a colored family, Thomas. Next was a white family. Next was a colored family, the James. Next was white. And next was white . . . And then you go on over and everybody got along grand . . . Because I know if my mother cooked a pot of soup, she’d pass some across the fence to the white lady next door. If she cooked up a big pot of soup here comes some over for us. And we all get along very nicely.

In contrast to the segregation that “was from the government,” to use Eddie Dixon’s phrase, these former Reno residents remembered that white Reno-dwellers crossed racial lines, recalling that the Fagan family had sometimes worshipped at Rock Creek Baptist. Summing up relations between blacks and whites in Reno, Dixon simply described them as, “Beautiful, beautiful.”²⁷⁴

Relations were not always harmonious between blacks and whites in Fort Reno—the *Evening Star* took notice of an altercation between “Christiana Bangerter, white, and Catherine Greene, colored” at Fort Reno in 1879, during which Greene hit Bangerter with a rock so hard that she required surgical attention—but scattered evidence tends to confirm these recollections of friendly relations between whites and blacks in Reno.²⁷⁵ 1910 census records for Dennison Place matched Moore’s description of the street nearly perfectly, with the Fagans and Hurdles living next to the Arthurs, Kidwells and Jameses, all of which were African American families. Both the Hurdles and Fagans stayed in Fort Reno

²⁷¹ Quotation found in document labeled “Fort Reno, Square 1760, Lot 23,” RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 45 A1-E18. See also, “Deaths in the District,” *Evening Star*, June 30, 1903; Notice of land transfer, Jacob Ernest to Ethelbert Thomas, *Evening Star*, May 2, 1883; United States Census, 1900; United States Census, 1910; United States Census, 1920.

²⁷² Needs of Reno School Discussed by Citizens,” *Evening Star*, November 11, 1916.

²⁷³ Helm, *Tenleystown*, 176.

²⁷⁴ “Interview at Rock Creek Baptist Church,” 20–21.

²⁷⁵ “Fight Between Women,” *Evening Star*, June 4, 1879.

for decades, living in proximity to African American families the whole time. In 1930, the Hurdles lived on Emery Place, along with two Black families, the Cooks and the Thomases. Annie Fagan and her family lived on the 4000 block of Davenport Street, which in 1930 was mostly white, though the Fagans lived close to two Black families, the Thompsons and the Snowdens, who called Davenport home.²⁷⁶ In 1899, F. C. Magruder, who seems to have been connected with the white-run Marguder’s Market in Tenleytown and was likely related to the Reno landlord E. H. Magruder, called attention to the plight of two destitute Black women with large families of small children living in Fort Reno, helping these families secure large baskets of food from the “pound party” run by the *Evening Star*.²⁷⁷ In a backhanded way, the 1895 murder of Thomas Matthews, Helen Dixon’s brother, also testified to interracial socializing in the Reno neighborhood. Before the murder, the killer, John Shoemaker had been out “in a store drinking” with Matthews and another Black man, John L. Hyson, who lived on Broad Branch Road.²⁷⁸ Obviously, this interaction turned violent and ended in tragedy, but more significantly, no one at the trial expressed surprise at this type of interracial socializing, suggesting that it must have been, to some degree at least, an ordinary occurrence. It is clear, however, that relations between Reno’s Black and white residents were not always harmonious; in 1930, the Hurdles lived next to two Black families on Emery Place, but they also lived next to Helen Mastbrook, a white woman who had lived in the community for many years with her husband, William. In September 1919, wanting to keep the block as white as possible, William had written into their home’s deed a restrictive covenant with “[t]he condition that sale to negroes should work a forfeiture.”²⁷⁹

The previously quoted newspaper report about the search for the “elusive colored murderer” Foultz may also be suggestive of how local whites regarded Reno’s Black residents. The author of the article recounting the search for Foultz distinguished between Foultz’s “friends at Fort Reno” and the “citizens” who “aided the police” in their search. The author of this article did not identify the race of either Foultz’s friends or the citizens who assisted the police, but the article’s emphasis on Foultz’s race was suggestive of a racial difference between these two groups—to identify whites as “citizens” in distinction to Foultz’s Black “friends at Fort Reno” certainly spoke to the different sociopolitical standing members of these groups occupied. The article also serves as a reminder that Washington remained, in many ways, a Southern town in which the type of explosive and sudden racial violence common in other Southern communities of the day remained possible. The *Star* reporter explained that, “The appearance of many bands of armed men, walking, running

²⁷⁶ United States Census, 1910; United States Census, 1930.

²⁷⁷ “Stories of Privation,” *Evening Star*, February 17, 1899.

²⁷⁸ “Fighting for Life,” *Evening Star*, February 28, 1894.

²⁷⁹ Charles W. Stetson to Fred Coldren, March 22, 1930, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 46 A1-E18.

and riding over the various roads, at first gave rise to a rumor that a lynching was in prospect . . . ” Such was not the case, but apparently this scenario was believable to the area’s residents.²⁸⁰

On at least one occasion, a Black Reno resident was the victim of a racially motivated attack. In May 1908, a Samuel Johnson, who lived on Chesapeake Street, was attacked by an Edward Bradley, a white former deputy sheriff whom Johnson encountered on a Tenleytown railcar. The *Washington Herald* explained that as Johnson was attempting to move to the back of the car, he had stumbled over Bradley’s foot. Bradley demanded an apology; “Johnson retorted in vile language, and the white man rose from his seat to put the negro off the car.” The source of Bradley’s anger, the *Herald* asserted in seeming confirmation of the racially motivated nature of the attack, was that Bradley, “a white man [had resented] a negro using profane language in the presence of women.” Bradley pushed Johnson from the car at a stop at the corner of Wisconsin and Nebraska Avenues. Johnson, “it is said,” at that point attempted to pick up a rock and throw it at Bradley, at which point Bradley “took a knife from his pocket and stabbed the negro.” Bradley was arrested and charged with assault with a deadly weapon, while Johnson was taken to Georgetown University Hospital with “a deep wound in his neck and shoulder.”²⁸¹

Racist violence was an ever-present danger for Black residents of Reno, and it seems that many whites who lived just outside Reno looked upon the neighborhood and its residents with scorn. The petition drawn up by the white residents of Grant Road referred to at the start of the present chapter, which objected to the District Commissioners’ rumored plans to build a new school for Black children on Grant Road, highlighted this attitude. The Commissioners’ intention to open a new school for Black children on Grant Road came as a “surprise to the tax payers of this section,” and inspired their “vigorous petition.” The residents of Grant Road listed several objections to having a school for Black children in their midst: it would bring “serious financial loss to the property owners” by causing home and land values to depreciate, representing a “needless sacrifice of the property interests of the tax payers of this section.” Moreover, they asserted, it was bad policy to locate a Black school “in a section owned and settled exclusively by white people.” The white representatives of Grant Road did nod to the issue of convenience for the Fort Reno Black community, arguing that it would be better for Reno-dwellers to have the school “located in their own midst on Fort Reno.” Their petition even suggested that they had discussed the matter with leading Black citizens of Reno. Grant Road’s white residents explained that the majority of African Americans in the area lived on the Fort, “the centre of their local population,” and claimed that the “best element among the colored people desire the school to be located on Fort Reno . . . ” This last claim was clearly true, and

²⁸⁰ “Hunting for Foulz,” *Evening Star*, September 7, 1897.

²⁸¹ “Like Helfin Case—White Man Stabs Negro on Cars for Talking Loud,” *Washington Herald*, May 31, 1908.

certainly the opening of the Jesse Lee Reno School was met with great fanfare in 1904, as detailed in the opening pages of this chapter. But this petition showcased local whites’ determination to keep the Black and white communities of Tenleytown separate; it hinted at dialogue between the races, but suggested cold, distant relations between them, local whites taking pains to show that they had sought the opinions of only the “best element” of the local Black community.²⁸² The concern for property values that the white representatives of Grant Road cited, moreover, were the same that justified the proliferation of white citizens’ associations and restrictive covenants in the early decades of the twentieth century as instruments for preventing African Americans from purchasing land in white neighborhoods.²⁸³



Figure 13: 3913 Donaldson Place, early twentieth century. (Courtesy of National Park Service)

²⁸² “Petition of the Taxpayers of Grant Road,” undated, circa February 1902, HR57A-F1.2, 1.3, Com on Appropriation to District of Columbia Fortifications, Box 6, HMFY 2007, Accompanying Paper Files, 57 Congress, Records of the US House of Representatives 57th Congress, RG 233.

²⁸³ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 244–246.

Interviews with whites who lived near Fort Reno during its heyday left a similar impression. In the 1970s, Robert Drury, who had lived near Fort Reno since 1918, remembered the settlement as a “rural slum.” “Everybody,” he claimed, “was glad to see it go. Terrible neighborhood, looked crummy. It was an eyesore.” Drury remembered that he had been chased through the neighborhood by its residents on occasion— “[w]alking up there was an adventure,” he remembered—but conceded that he had not known any of Reno’s residents. “It was another world,” he explained. “I was just aware of a big chunk of houses being up there.”²⁸⁴ In a less demeaning vein, Melvin Tievsky, whose father had owned the Wisconsin Market near Wisconsin Avenue and 42nd Street, just outside Reno, said of the houses in Reno: “they were weather beaten, let’s put it that way.” He hadn’t ever been inside any of these dwellings, and he conceded that they were likely nice on the inside, but, he explained, “they were old frame houses. I guess they were just sort of ‘jerry-built’ after the war when people came in and, uh, found land and just put houses up themselves in any way or shape that they could. The outsides as I remember, were not, uh, particularly recently painted.” Summing up, Tievsky explained that Reno “just looked like a very old community. Southern-type community. That’s the best way to describe it.”²⁸⁵

Post-Reno Life

As will be seen in the following chapter, Reno’s destruction was accomplished by a coalition of local white leaders and real estate agents who found allies in the city and federal governments willing to help them wipe the neighborhood off the map. Harold Doyle, a local real estate agent, played a leading role in accomplishing the clearing of Fort Reno. In 1938, he predicted that, once they had been induced to sell or had their homes condemned, “The colored folks in the neighborhood would, I am sure, scatter.”²⁸⁶ He seems to have meant this statement as an inducement to complete Reno’s destruction (which was well underway by 1938) as well as perhaps a comment on the thinness of the communal bonds that bound Reno’s citizens to one another. Doyle was, in a sense, correct; when, from the late 1920s through the early 1950s, Reno’s citizens either sold or were forced to sell, census records indicate that they did not recreate their neighborhood by attempting to congregate in some new location within the District. The realities of the local real estate market surely would have precluded such an attempt anyway, but the truth was that Reno’s citizens

²⁸⁴ “Interview with Mr. Robert Drury, July 12, 1977,” 5–6, 9, 11. Courtesy of Alcione Amos, Anacostia Community Museum. Original located at Washington DC Historical Society.

²⁸⁵ “Interview with Marvin Tievsky, July 15, 1977,” 6–7. Courtesy of Alcione Amos, Anacostia Community Museum. Original located at Washington DC Historical Society.

²⁸⁶ Harold Doyle to John Nolen, Jr., July 10, 1938, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1926–1961, 500-10, Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.

possessed connections to Black communities across the city. Fort Reno citizens had forged bonds of family and friendship that stretched across the District, and many had children who had moved out of Reno and made their homes in nearby neighborhoods. Reno’s African American community scattered not because its former residents were rootless, but because their roots had spread throughout the District.

After the death of her husband Samuel, Clara Hebron had left Reno for Quincy Place Northwest, where she lived with an aunt while supporting herself by her work as a maid and by taking in several boarders. By 1940, Lillian Neale had left Reno for Deanwood, a predominantly Black neighborhood in the city’s Northeast quadrant. Aaron Dixon and his wife Helen, Reno-dwellers since the turn of the twentieth century, had moved with their son Aaron Jr. to Irving Place Northwest.²⁸⁷ Harold Doyle claimed that “three or four” Reno-dwellers who had worked for him had “gone northeast to about 45th Street and Bennings Road, where there is quite a large settlement, and where apartments and numerous small houses have recently been built for negro occupancy.”²⁸⁸ Some former Reno residents seem to have sought new residences together in non-traditional household formations. In 1910, census officials had found Alfred Neale, Lillian Neale’s husband, living with a Joseph Payton, whom they described as his “partner”; three decades later, the 1940 census found Payton living in Deanwood with Elmer W. Bates, a World War I veteran and army dispensary employee whose grandmother, Sarah J. Browne, and mother, Margaret Bates Torrence (for many years the RCA’s secretary), had been longtime Fort Reno residents.²⁸⁹ In a similar vein, for many years a widowed domestic worker named Mary Dade had lived on Vincent Street next to Edward Douse, the Jamaican-born pastor at St. George’s in Reno. When the neighborhood was destroyed, Douse and Dade stayed together, and in 1940 she could be found residing with him as a live-in housekeeper at 228 2nd Street Northwest.²⁹⁰

Other Reno-dwellers clung to the remnants of their community as long as they could. As mentioned above, the Scott family stayed on Chesapeake Street into the early 1940s, as did members of the Warren family on Dennison. Alexander Lewis, son of RCA Vice President Thornton Lewis, stayed with his wife Daisy in their home at 4720 Howard Street until 1951, when they were forced out.²⁹¹ Clara Masterson, the widow of John D. Masterson, and her son Earl remained in the neighborhood through the 1940 census, she

²⁸⁷ United States Census, 1940.

²⁸⁸ Harold E. Doyle to John Nolen, Jr., July 10, 1938, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1926–1961, 5001-0 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.

²⁸⁹ United States Census, 1910; United States Census, 1920; United States Census, 1940; Untitled notice, April 18, 1919.

²⁹⁰ United States Census, 1920; United States Census, 1930; United States Census, 1940.

²⁹¹ “Fort Reno Raze Victims Seek Homes,” *Washington Post*, April 1, 1951.

renting at 4819 41st Street with two of her daughters, and he renting on nearby Ellicott Street with his wife Duma and son Earl Jr.²⁹² Clara’s niece Evelyn, daughter of Clara’s brother Julius and sister-in-law Rosa, was still living on 41st Street in 1973 when the Ruppert Real Estate Company informed her and members of five other families renting houses on 41st Street, the last remnants of the Fort Reno neighborhood, that they would have to leave. Asked for details about life in Fort Reno and their impending forced move, Masterson gathered members of the other five families into her kitchen. Most of the group that assembled were, at the time, preparing to go to the funeral of John Johnson, a former Tenleytown resident. Viola Hill described the neighborhood as “beautiful and perfect . . . just like any other quiet neighborhood.” They talked of time spent at the Reno School and trips to Georgetown to buy beer, but none, they said, possessed the cash they would need to purchase their homes once Ruppert Real Estate had finished its planned renovations. “They told us we’d have to move, within thirty days,” Masterson explained, “but you tell me where?”²⁹³

Once they had been forced out of Reno, former residents sometimes returned to the area, recalling the scenes of their youth. In 1977, Mary Daniel remembered having returned to the Reno School in recent years with some companions, “to find all the places, all the things we had done.” They found the building under the control of the District Department of Transportation, and an evidently sympathetic building manager let Daniel and her party into their old schoolhouse, where they sought out “what we thought was Miss Tibbs’ room.”²⁹⁴ During the decades that individuals like Mary Daniel and families like the Mastersons had spent living in Reno, they had forged lasting bonds with their neighbors that even their community’s destruction could not break. Eddie Dixon remembered that while former Reno residents had “scattered all over town” after the neighborhood was destroyed—no one he knew moved to Maryland, he said—he did “keep in touch with quite a few of them.” Rock Creek Baptist Church, long moved out of Reno but still a thriving congregation, helped former residents stay connected. Augusta Moore added that each year, out at Fort Reno, former Reno-dwellers held “what we call homecoming out there,” and she made a point of explaining that it was the former residents themselves, rather than Rock Creek Baptist, who planned the yearly event.²⁹⁵ In September 1983, a *Washington Post* reporter visited one of these homecomings, at which nearly one hundred people gathered at Fort Reno Park “to commemorate the now-vanished neighborhood that

²⁹² United States Census, 1940.

²⁹³ “Progress to Displace Residents of Century-Old Black Enclave: Progress Ousting Reno Residents,” *Washington Post*, December 8, 1973.

²⁹⁴ “Interview at Rock Creek Baptist Church, August 2, 1977,” 32. M.V. Tibbs had become eighth-grade principal of the Reno School after the death of Laura Hawkesworth in early 1909. See “Promotions,” *Evening Star*, March 13, 1909. On Hawkesworth’s death, see Notice of death, Laura Hawkesworth, *Washington Bee*, February 27, 1909.

²⁹⁵ “Interview at Rock Creek Baptist Church,” 5.

was the home of their childhood or the home of their parents or grandparents.” Former Reno resident Charles Arthur explained that the tradition had started back in the 1960s when, at a funeral for a former Reno resident, someone asked, “‘Why are we always getting together for something sad? Let us get together for something happy.’” The families gathered at Reno that day talked happily of times when “family life was better.”²⁹⁶ The gathering provided living proof of Eddie Dixon’s verdict about the strong sense of community in the neighborhood in which he had grown up.

Even on this joyous occasion, though, melancholy crept in. Everett “Baby” Masterson, son of Julius and Rosa Masterson and brother of Evelyn Masterson, remembered the sadness he had felt when Evelyn was “priced out” of her home. Taking in his surroundings, he had conceded of Fort Reno Park, “This park is all right with me now, I guess.”²⁹⁷ The fact was that, while Everett and the other former Reno-dwellers gathered in the park that day found solace and friendship in the company of their former neighbors, they also confronted a reminder of the fact that they had been forced from homes of many decades to make room for parkland, schools, and recreational facilities intended to serve the needs of local whites. To Robert Drury, observing the clearing of Reno as it happened over a span of decades, the process appeared to happen naturally. Drury remembered growing up, “just watching this area get squeezed in all the time.” Drury continued: “it sort of happened, you know . . . ? People didn’t object to change. At that time, it meant progress.” The residents of Reno, he asserted, “got good money for the land and moved elsewhere.” In Drury’s telling, Reno’s clearing happened as if by magic, a natural process, free of identifiable outside agency; certainly, no one had objected to Fort Reno’s destruction.²⁹⁸ In truth, Reno’s destruction was the work of a powerful combination of public officials and private-sector interests. Rather than accepting their neighborhood’s destruction passively, Reno’s residents had made a determined resistance to the clearing of the neighborhood and few, if any, felt that they had received proper compensation for the homes they were forced to abandon. As John F. Scott told a congressional subcommittee in 1927: “As a resident [of Fort Reno] and property owner I object to taking Fort Reno for the very fact that it is my home, and when you take a man’s home you take everything.”²⁹⁹

²⁹⁶ “A Tender Tribute to Old Tenleytown,” *Washington Post*, September 15, 1983.

²⁹⁷ “A Tender Tribute to Old Tenleytown.”

²⁹⁸ “Interview with Robert Drury,” 3, 7–8.

²⁹⁹ *Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on the District of Columbia House of Representatives, Sixty-Ninth Congress, Second Session, Appointed to Investigate Affairs of the District of Columbia, Volume I*, 766.

CHAPTER THREE

A “HOLD-UP”

In 1944, Leslie B. Wright, Executive Secretary of the Northwest Citizens' Council, testified before a subcommittee of the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia, directing most of her commentary to the program of the National Capital Housing Authority. During her testimony, she paused to correct a recent statement made by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. The first lady had claimed that “Reno had been taken away from the Negroes and given to the whites.” Wright had, she said, checked with officials at the NCPPC, who had given her their perspective on the matter. NCPPC officials assured her that, “Reno was never taken away from the Negroes and given to the whites. Reno was a country district with a Negro settlement and the houses that were torn down were torn down when the National Capital Parks took it over for a part of the parks.”³⁰⁰

In making this statement, Wright mixed truth with fiction. She was correct that Reno had been destroyed to make room for parkland and other educational and recreational facilities; perhaps, in her mind, because the land that Reno's Black homeowners had been forced to give up was not turned into a white development and filled up with white homeowners, this meant that it had not been “given to the whites.” What she either did not see or chose to ignore was that Reno's clearing and conversion had been the work of a determined set of white civic leaders, businessmen and government officials who, over a period of decades, worked toward clearing this far northwest corner of Washington, DC of an African American presence. Reno's conversion into land for parks, schools, water works, and recreational facilities had met the supposedly urgent needs of expanding white neighborhoods, boosted the value of property held by white speculators and homeowners in the area, and wiped out an area of Black settlement amid the wealthy and expanding white suburbs of Tenleytown and Chevy Chase. Reno's remains had not been overlaid by a new, white neighborhood, but it had been “given to the whites” as completely as if Reno's Black residents *had* been evicted so that new white residents could simply move into their vacated homes. Wright had been interested in Reno for many years before she gave this

³⁰⁰ *Investigation of the Program of the National Capital Housing Authority, Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on the District of Columbia, United States Senate, Seventy-Eighth Congress, Second Session on S. Res. 184 A Resolution Authorizing an Investigation of the Program of the National Capital Housing Authority, and S. 1699, A Bill to Amend the District of Columbia Alley Dwelling Act as Amended* (United States Government Printing Office: Washington, 1944), 445–447.

testimony. In 1934, she had written in a letter to the editor of the *Evening Star* that seemingly referred to her work with various citizens’ associations based in Northwest Washington—such as the Forest Hills Citizens’ Association, of which she was also a member—and stated that, “for years . . . We have been fighting . . . to get the parts of the Reno section used for schools at least made sightly and passable.”³⁰¹

The NCPPC to which Wright, incredulous at Eleanor Roosevelt’s interpretation of events, turned for information had been one of the key players in Reno’s destruction and, unsurprisingly, its members did not agree with the first lady’s characterization. The NCPPC had joined with other white-run organizations—including the Northwest Suburban Citizens’ Association and Washington Board of Trade—and white politicians to pass legislation releasing funds for the acquisition of property in Reno and worked to pressure Reno residents into selling, with the threat of condemnation proceedings ever present. Reno-dwellers had fought the movement to destroy their neighborhood, and they succeeded in delaying it for several decades. Calls for Reno’s clearing began in the 1890s, but Reno’s Black neighborhood was not fully destroyed until the mid-twentieth century. In the end, Reno-dwellers could not overcome the powerful interests that wanted Reno gone, and Reno fell victim to the machinations of white Washingtonians bent on ensuring racial segregation of city neighborhoods, achieving city beautification at the expense of the welfare of city residents, and reaping profits from the sale of Reno land. Reno and its residents were the victims of, as Reno property holder Thomas A. Johnson put it, a “hold-up.”³⁰²

Unsanitary, Boisterous Reno

Starting in the late nineteenth century, individuals and groups who wanted Reno wiped off the map began to argue that unsanitary conditions in the neighborhood justified its removal. The attention of residents of nearby neighborhoods to goings-on in Reno seems to have been first attracted by the construction of water facilities—construction on a water pipe began in 1893, and the first of Reno’s three reservoirs was completed in 1899—as well as the growth of Reno’s population.³⁰³ Laments about conditions in Reno and the behavior of Reno residents started in the mid-1890s. In July 1893, Tenleytown residents complained

³⁰¹ Leslie Boudinot Wright, “New Buildings for Zoo But None for Schools,” *Evening Star*, January 19, 1935. On Wright’s membership in the Forest Hills Citizens’ Association, see “Blanton Scored for Blocking Bill,” *Evening Star*, March 7, 1933. She had also been president of the Ben Murch Home and School Association. See “School Matrons Rehearing Asked,” *Evening Star*, January 18, 1930.

³⁰² *Acquirement of Reno Subdivision*, 5.

³⁰³ “A Preliminary Archaeological and Historical Survey of a Portion of Fort Reno Park in Washington, DC prepared for The Department of General Services Government of the District of Columbia by Dr. Louana M. Lackey under Federal Antiquities Permit #83-DC-171,” Potomac River Archaeological Survey, The American University, Washington, DC, June 1983, 12.

in “loud and standard tones” about the “colored people who weekly hold picnics on Fort Reno.” Tenleytown residents were irked by the “boisterous music” featured at these all-night gatherings, and by the fact that attendees sometimes wandered too close “to the homes of surrounding residents” for comfort, “uttering profane language and singing ribald songs.” Tenleytowners threatened to protest the continued issuance of permits for such gatherings if this behavior persisted.³⁰⁴ As time went on, Reno’s antagonists would learn to delete most overtly racial content from their criticisms, attempting to focus solely on conditions prevailing in the neighborhood. But this item about picnics held by African Americans suggests that, from the beginning, tensions between residents of Reno and surrounding neighborhoods stemmed from the racial divide that separated many Reno-dwellers from nearby white neighborhoods.

Later that same year, members of the Tenleytown Citizens’ Association (TCA) lamented the state of sanitation in Reno. Water works in Reno would soon be open, said Tenleytown physician E. W. Slaymaker, and the “many pools of water” that stood year-round “in the vicinity of Fort Reno” contaminated the surrounding air and attracted frogs; if left unchecked, they would pollute nearby wells as they allowed waste water to seep into the ground.³⁰⁵ Tenleytown citizens lodged a similar complaint the following summer, when thirty cases of typhoid and other fevers presented themselves in Reno. Specifying that both Blacks and whites were impacted, “a doctor of prominence in Tenleytown,” blamed the situation on the “complete absence of sewage facilities,” which allowed waste to contaminate the water supply.³⁰⁶ Indeed, around this time, city officials concurred that sanitary conditions in Reno were in need of updating; in response to complaints about sanitation and waste disposal in Tenleytown and Reno, a health officer had visited the area in the spring of 1893, and found a scarcity of proper waste disposal facilities and “other conditions . . . calculated to breed disease in the future.” Reno, an outlying settlement still largely rural in character, would hardly have been the only such village in 1890s America vulnerable to such complaints, and it is likely that, at this early date, sanitary conditions in the neighborhood were indeed lacking—as they apparently were in Tenleytown as well.³⁰⁷ This was not the only report of poor sanitary conditions in Reno during this period. In response to the proliferation of typhoid fever in northwest Washington and Maryland, a Dr. Kober

³⁰⁴ “Disorderly Conduct Complained Of,” *Evening Star*, July 27, 1893

³⁰⁵ “Improvements of Various Characters Discussed and Their Urgent Necessity Stated—Officers Elected,” *Evening Star*, November 21, 1893.

³⁰⁶ “Tenleytown Citizens Complain of Sanitary Conditions,” *Evening Star*, August 24, 1894.

³⁰⁷ “Tenleytown and Reno Visited and Many Unsanitary Conditions Found,” *Evening Star*, May 24, 1893. The *Star* journalist who worked on this story indicated that conditions in Reno and Tenleytown were similar. Complaints in days prior had motivated an Inspector Odell to “make a thorough inspection” of “Tenleytown and the village of Reno.” Odell found “a scarcity of box privies” and “other conditions which he thought were calculated to breed disease in the future.” The *Star*’s reporter also mentioned that health officials would be analyzing water samples from wells in both Reno and Tenleytown. Nothing in the article suggested that sanitary conditions in Tenleytown and Reno differed in any way.

talked of substandard sanitation in the region, including a family that “deposited [ordure] upon the surface, about forty yards from their well” and that “occupied one of the most commanding heights at Reno, and are only evidently tenants of what promises to be valuable real estate.”³⁰⁸

Valid though those complaints about sanitary conditions in Reno likely were in the 1890s, it is equally clear that, as time passed, supporters of clearing Reno used complaints about the state of sanitation there to urge the neighborhood’s removal. These complaints likely had some basis, but they also provided a convenient way for proponents of Renos’ clearing to press their case without basing their arguments on race. Indeed, before the 1890s were out, local citizens’ associations began to urge the District Commissioners and Congress that Reno needed to be bought, cleared, and turned into a park, citing arguments about the state of conditions in Reno as justification.

Citizens’ associations such as the TCA played a leading role in the movement to destroy Reno. These associations proliferated across Washington in the 1880s and 1890s. They limited membership to whites, and focused on maintaining property values, “a protean idea” that encompassed everything from city beautification to lobbying the city for increased public services. One of the citizens’ associations’ most important tasks was to keep Black families from moving into white neighborhoods; many white homeowners believed that the presence of even a single Black family in a white neighborhood would negatively impact property values, and they associated African Americans with crime, poverty, and urban blight. In response to the proliferation of these all-white citizens’ associations and their efforts to create and maintain residential segregation, Black Washingtonians formed their own groups, which they called “civic associations.” The RCA was one of these Black-run organizations; it is unclear why it branded itself as a “citizens’ association” rather than a civic association.³⁰⁹

DC citizens’ associations fought to keep their own neighborhoods all-white; they also sought to wipe out Black settlements on the fringes of white enclaves, and, in the effort to clear Reno, one citizens’ association loomed above the others. Over the first three decades of the twentieth century, the Northwest Suburban Citizens’ Association (NSCA), which represented residents of expanding white neighborhoods in DC’s Northwest quadrant—including Cleveland Park, Cathedral Heights, Chevy Chase, and Wesley Heights—emerged as one of Reno’s chief antagonists. As early as 1899, it was calling for Reno to be

³⁰⁸ “Polluted Wells—The Cause of Typhoid Fever in the Suburbs,” *Evening Star*, December 5, 1895.

³⁰⁹ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*. 192–193. So far as is known, the officers and committee heads of the RCA were Black Reno-dwellers or Black men and women living outside of Reno. One newspaper item, however, suggests that a spring 1926 meeting of the RCA was interracial in character. See “Bill to Condemn Ft. Reno Property Fought by Race,” *Washington Tribune*, April 9, 1926, an article which is discussed later in this chapter. This item, combined with evidence from the previous chapter of friendly relations between whites who lived within Reno proper and the reality that the RCA dealt with matters of general community import, should force us to at least consider the possibility that, if they did not exercise positions of leadership within the body, Reno’s white citizens may have regularly attended meetings, or at the very least followed the doings of the RCA.

cleared and converted into a park.³¹⁰ Meeting in the Tenleytown town hall in late June, the NSCA heard a report from Executive Committee chairman Louis P. Shoemaker detailing the desired improvements to the northwest neighborhoods, including the building of a nearby park.³¹¹ Apparently NSCA officials had been engaged in dialogue with the District Commissioners about a park for some time; Shoemaker mentioned that the commissioners had asked the NSCA for a suggestion about where to place the desired park. The NSCA recommended that the park be built on “the land around the reservoir . . . known as Fort Reno Hill.” In explaining the Executive Committee’s choice, Shoemaker explained that “its present condition is very unsatisfactory to the taxpayers and the location is regarded as well adapted for the public park.”³¹²

What was unsatisfactory about Reno’s present condition, or why this spot was particularly well-adapted for a public park, Shoemaker did not explain, but his use of the term “taxpayer” was significant. “Taxpayer” had become a politically charged term in the aftermath of the Civil War. In the early 1870s, as white Southerners wrested control of state governments from Republican administrations, some had seized on their identity as taxpayers to make ostensibly non-racial arguments against Reconstruction and Republican rule. The Fourteenth Amendment had recognized all Americans born in the United States, Black and white, as citizens, so Southern whites could not use the term “citizen” to distinguish themselves from the formerly enslaved men and women whose political power they wanted to check; they could, however, seize on their identity as taxpayers to suggest that they supported the government through tax revenues and their opponents did not, thereby staking claim to a higher order of citizenship than non-taxpayers and a right to political power. The taxpayers’ movement was part of white Southerners’ successful campaign to overthrow Reconstruction and construct a new system of white supremacy and, as Kate Masur has shown, a “taxpayers movement” was part of whites conservatives’ effort to end suffrage and inaugurate commission government in Washington.³¹³ Shoemaker’s use of the term “taxpayer” here was consistent with the term’s usage in the conservative, white

³¹⁰ “New Name Chosen for Citizens’ Association,” *Top Notch*, January 2, 1929.

³¹¹ Louis Pierce Shoemaker was a descendant of the same Pierce family that had operated Pierce Mill, which was situated to the southeast of Reno, along Rock Creek. The mill was founded in 1829, and its operators used the hydropower provided by Rock Creek to grind, corn, wheat, and rye. The Shoemaker family’s holdings, which eventually included a sawmill, an apple orchard, and a tree nursery, were incorporated within Rock Creek Park by an act of Congress in 1890. In 1933, a new round of legislation transferred the property to the National Park Service, which continues to administer it today. Louis P. Shoemaker was a banking and insurance executive who was, in addition to his membership in the NSCA, one of the organizers of the Brightwood Citizens’ Association, as well as its longtime president. See “Rock Creek Park,” *National Park Service*, available <http://www.nps.gov/places/peirce-mill.htm>; John A. Saul and Allen C. Clark, “In Memoriam: Louis Pierce Shoemaker, 1856–1916,” *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.* 20 (1917): 296–298.

³¹² “Makes Its Wants Known—Proceedings of Annual Meeting of Northwest Suburban Association,” *Evening Star*, June 28, 1899.

³¹³ Kate Masur, *An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle Over Equality in Washington, DC* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 194–200.

supremacist political language of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: it suggested that the whites represented in his group all paid taxes and thus possessed a higher degree of citizenship, and entitlement to a different level of consideration, than the presumably non-taxpaying Black residents of Reno.³¹⁴ It was also consistent with the NSCA’s attitude toward Reno, which remained essentially unchanged over the course of the decades: that the needs of white residents in the expanding neighborhoods adjacent to Reno superseded those of Reno’s residents, and therefore Reno-dwellers could legitimately be displaced to make room for white educational and recreational facilities. Of course, Shoemaker presented no evidence that Reno-dwellers did not pay taxes, and his assumption that they did not seems clearly misguided; the occupations and home values recorded for Reno-dwellers in twentieth-century censuses certainly suggest that many Reno-dwellers paid taxes. Shoemaker seems to have been counting on his audience to implicitly trust his suggestion that those who lived in Reno did not pay taxes and those who wanted it gone represented the productive portion of the community that was taxed.

Interest in clearing at least part of Reno and replacing it with a park remained high during the first decade of the twentieth century. In 1901, the TCA threw its support behind the idea. In May 1901, the *Washington Evening Times* reported that the TCA planned to join the District Commissioners in lobbying Congress for funds to purchase ten acres of land surrounding the reservoir and convert it into a park. “The purchase of the property,” the *Times* explained matter-of-factly, “will wipe out the colored settlement on Reno, where the houses are small and detrimental to surrounding interests.” Though it was the unnamed *Times* correspondent who used these words, they were strikingly similar to the opinions TCA officials held about Reno or discussions about Reno conducted at TCA meetings.³¹⁵

“City Beautiful,” Real Estate Values, and Conversion Schemes

Clearing Reno and turning it into parkland also fit into the plans of Progressive city planners, who at the turn of the century devised a plan to revolutionize the nation’s capital. These city planners were acolytes of the City Beautiful movement, an attempt to deal with the unplanned, chaotic development of nineteenth-century cities and the problems of modern urban life, including crime, poverty, overcrowding, and poor sanitary conditions. Supporters of the City Beautiful movement believed that if they made cities appear clean and orderly through the construction of impressive public buildings, attractive public

³¹⁴ On the Taxpayers Conventions and their role in the undoing of Reconstruction, see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 415–416.

³¹⁵ “News from Georgetown —A Proposition to Purchase Land Near Fort Reno Reservoir,” *Evening Times*, May 24, 1901.

parks, and other common areas, city residents would take pride in their cities and treat them better. The City Beautiful movement found a champion in Senator James McMillan of Michigan, the turn-of-the-century chair of the Senate District Committee, at whose behest the Senate created the Senate Park Improvement Commission of the District of Columbia. In January 1902, chaired by McMillan and staffed by prominent city planners, the Commission unveiled a comprehensive plan—which became known informally as the McMillan Plan—“to dramatically reshape the city” by turning the National Mall into a civic park lined on either side with Neoclassical public buildings and creating a unified system of parks along the Potomac River, the Anacostia River, and Rock Creek. The McMillan Plan’s principles have guided city planners in the nation’s capital since the early decades of the twentieth century, and its legacy is visible today in the National Mall, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Federal Triangle.³¹⁶

The authors of the McMillan Plan had designs on Fort Reno from the outset, but even before the McMillan Plan had been devised, landscape architects and local officials had their eyes on the old fort. As early as 1895, the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. (a future McMillan Commission member) was meeting with the District’s engineer commissioner to recommend numerous changes to northwest Washington, including “a large park . . . around Fort Reno.”³¹⁷ The next year, the *Evening Star* reported that “The opening up of a drive around the Fort Reno fortifications is being contemplated by the Commissioners.”³¹⁸ The authors of the McMillan Plan expanded on these ideas. As it was the highest point in the District and “command[ed] remarkably wide views in all directions,” the authors of the McMillan Plan thought it “highly desirable” that Reno be “preserved from exclusive private occupation,” recommending the “acquirement of a sufficient area to protect the view against obstruction by houses of ordinary height on adjacent slopes.” Without forthrightly saying so, the McMillan Plan’s authors were calling for the destruction of the Fort Reno neighborhood, to be replaced by a circle and through parkways, which would “[bring] it within easy reach of Rock Creek Park and the city.”³¹⁹ The plan also called for the construction of a Fort Drive, a parkway that would ring the District and proceed along the line of the Civil War defenses; this vision represented another clear threat to Reno’s existence. And Reno residents, like dwellers of other neighborhoods whose continued existence was imperiled by the McMillan Plan, were hampered in efforts to fight the Plan’s implementation by the realities of disenfranchisement and

³¹⁶ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 197–200.

³¹⁷ “District Affairs—Changing the Plans for One Section of Street Extension,” *Evening Star*, November 15, 1895.

³¹⁸ “Georgetown Affairs,” *Evening Star*, July 21, 1896.

³¹⁹ Charles Moore, ed., *The Improvement of the Park System of the District of Columbia. I.--Report of the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia. II.--Report of the Park Commission* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1902), 91, 93.

government by the commission. Indeed, DC residents’ powerlessness had appealed to City Beautiful-inspired planners from the start: “Without having to be concerned about local democratic accountability, planners could work with a relatively small group of local and national leaders to implement their vision. District residents who might object to the planners’ efforts—including the Black community and the poor—had little opportunity to shape the conversation.”³²⁰

Throwing its full support behind the City Beautiful movement, in December 1903 the NSCA called on Congress to condemn the “Fort Reno Park tract” and enact the Park Commission’s plans for the Reno section. Members of the NSCA were well-connected enough to have persuaded a congressman, Kentucky’s August O. Stanley, to attend their meeting, and he and another speaker impressed upon the meeting’s attendees the need to beautify the nation’s capital and surrounding suburbs. Stanley lamented Americans’ seeming apathy toward conditions in their nation’s capital. Beautification efforts should not only target Washington’s downtown area, but the surrounding suburbs: “This city . . . should not be bounded on one side by a morass and on the other by a wilderness . . . The suburbs should be beautified, in order that the city proper might be spread out and the residents permitted to commune with nature and enjoy fresh air.”³²¹ Reno’s residents doubtless enjoyed fresh air as well, but, of course, Stanley’s comments highlighted the reality that the NSCA hoped to clear Reno so that white Washingtonians could enjoy the area’s bucolic charms.

When discussion turned to the clearing of Reno, the NSCA offered three rationales for the project. First, Reno “demand[ed] immediate action” because its reservoir was “surrounded by a squalid village, without sewers or other sanitary safeguards, [and was] a great and constant menace to the public health.” The NSCA also cited considerations perhaps more likely to move congressmen who might not be swayed by local public health concerns: “patriotic consideration[s]” recommended the project, given the now-vanished Fort Reno’s role in defending the Union, as did the “intrinsic beauty” of the spot. Over the subsequent decades, advocates of clearing Reno rarely failed to cite the neighborhood’s natural charms as a reason for its clearing; the usually unspoken but strongly implied concomitant of this argument was that Reno’s current residents were undeserving of residence on such a desirable spot, and that the valuable, picturesque land should be acquired for use and enjoyment by those who were. The area, explained the NSCA, was the highest point in Washington, and “command[ed] an unparalleled view of valley and mountain for a distance of sixty miles, and thus [could be] easily made [into] the most picturesque of all the parks in the District of Columbia.” Last, the NSCA noted that the urgency

³²⁰ Quotation appears in Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 198. See also, Flanagan, “Battle of Fort Reno.”

³²¹ Stanley quoted in, “Would Beautify City—Representative Stanley’s Tribute to US Capital,” *Evening Star*, December 5, 1903. See also, “Ask Condemnation of Fort Reno Tract—Citizens Declare Place is Unsanitary,” *Washington Times*, December 5, 1903; “Fort Reno Reservoir,” *Evening Star*, December 5, 1903.

of clearing Reno also stemmed from increasing land values in the area: “the land embraced in said park can now be secured for a very low sum, while years hence it will certainly cost an enormous outlay.” The arguments advanced by the NSCA at this 1903 meeting constituted the core of the argument for Reno’s clearing, and they remained essentially unchanged through the late 1920s, when the clearing of Reno began in earnest.³²²

The NSCA sought, it seems, to enlist Civil War veterans to help pressure Congress regarding Reno’s conversion. At that December 1903 meeting, someone (accounts do not specify whom) suggested that the “sentimental and patriotic considerations involved” might interest the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR). The NSCA appointed a committee of three to pursue Reno’s conversion and instructed them to “ask the assistance of the old soldiers” in lobbying Congress and the District Commissioners.³²³ The GAR was the pre-eminent organization for Union veterans; founded in 1866, it had taken a leading role in commemorating the Civil War and also become a powerful lobbying organization, particularly around the issue of veterans’ pensions, as well as a valuable voter turnout organization for the Republican Party.³²⁴ Their 1903 effort to cultivate GAR support speaks to the political savvy of the NSCA’s leaders, and it also surely accounts for the military emphasis of the legislation concerning Reno introduced in Congress the following year. In late January 1904, Senator Thomas M. Patterson of Colorado introduced a bill to turn Reno into a national military park that authorized the Secretary of War to acquire the neighborhood through purchase or condemnation. By the terms of Patterson’s bill, the park would be governed by a three-member committee; in a seeming bid to interest the GAR in supporting the scheme, the bill required two to be Civil War veterans.³²⁵ Similar legislation came before Congress twice more during the decade; in February 1906, and again in December 1907, Representative Charles T. Dunwell of New York introduced a bill requiring the Secretary of War to acquire Reno. Dunwell, formerly the comptroller of Brooklyn, supposedly took “a great interest in the welfare of the District of Columbia” and sought to turn Reno into “a gigantic . . . public park to commemorate the struggles of the Federals against the Confederates in defense of the National Capital. . . .”³²⁶ Dunwell’s bill specified that the

³²² Quotations appear in, “Would Beautify City—Representative Stanley’s Tribute to US Capital,” *Evening Star*, December 5, 1903. See also, “Ask Condemnation of Fort Reno Tract—Citizens Declare Place is Unsanitary,” *Washington Times*, December 5, 1903; “Fort Reno Reservoir,” *Evening Star*, December 5, 1903.

³²³ “Appealing to Congress—Northwest Suburbanites Demand Improvement in That Section,” *Washington Post*, December 5, 1903.

³²⁴ On the Grand Army of the Republic, see Stuart Charles McConnell, *Glorious Contentment* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Donald Shaffer, *After the Glory: The Struggles of Black Civil War Veterans* (University Press of Kansas, 2004).

³²⁵ “District Matters in Congress—To Extend Albemarle Street—Military Park at Fort Reno,” *Evening Star*, January 27, 1904; “Fort Reno National Park—Bill for Preservation of Military Works Around National Capital,” *Washington Post*, January 28, 1904.

³²⁶ “Prominent Delegations in the Fifty Ninth Congress—No. 3 – New York City,” *Washington Times*, March 4, 1906.

resulting Fort Reno National Park would be placed under the jurisdiction of a three-man commission; it seems to represent the survival of the idea to interest the GAR in Reno’s conversion.³²⁷

The War Department’s objection to this scheme for Reno’s conversion was fiscal. In February 1904, in reference to the Reno bill introduced the previous month by Colorado’s Thomas Patterson, Secretary of War William Howard Taft reminded the Chair of the Senate’s Military Affairs Committee of the previous Secretary of War’s objection, which was also fiscal in nature, to the federal government’s purchase of land at Appomattox, as a way of illustrating his reasons for rejecting the Reno proposal.³²⁸ The idea to turn Reno into a military park did not bear fruit, but the powerful interests that sought to clear Reno persevered; that the War Department’s opposition to this proposal was purely fiscal likely gave those interested in converting Reno hope that they would succeed once they identified a government department or organization that did have sufficient funds to undertake the project.

Interest in Reno’s conversion continued because of the persistence of the NSCA, but also because the prospect of a park at Reno piqued the interest of players in the local real estate market. Indeed, during the first decade of the twentieth century, multiple items appeared in DC papers touting the prospect of the government building a park in the area and the resulting profits to be made by those who purchased nearby land. As part of its regular reporting on the local real estate market, the *Washington Post* in March 1904 noted that the “movement to establish a park on Fort Reno” had driven up real estate values in “that heretofore sluggishly moving subdivision.” According to the *Post*, speculators were purchasing land in the hope that Congress would appropriate money for the park; during the previous month alone, forty-eight land transfers involving Reno real estate had taken place. In justifying the conversion of the neighborhood, one section of which was “thickly settled by a negro population,” the *Post* mentioned its value as a “war site” and the familiar argument that the land surrounding the reservoir needed to be controlled by the government for “hygienic reasons.”³²⁹ In 1906, Washington’s *Evening Star*, in its “View West from the Capitol” section, extolled the virtues of Reno as a location where small buyers could acquire land and hope to see the value of their purchase double in short order. “A part of this property will no doubt be taken,” added the *Star*, “as has been proposed, for a

³²⁷ “District Bills in Senate,” *Washington Post*, December 9, 1907; “Fort Reno National Park,” *Evening Star*, February 8, 1906.

³²⁸ William Howard Taft to Chairman of Senate Committee on Military Affairs, February 6, 1904, RG 46, Records of the United States Senate, 58th Congress, Sen 58A-E1, S.3832-S.3972, Box No. 38.

³²⁹ “Real Estate Market: Great Activity Noted in Section above Florida Avenue,” *Washington Post*, March 6, 1904.

government park for that section of the District.”³³⁰ Similarly, in February 1909, an advertisement in the *Star* placed by James B. Wimer offered investors the chance to double their investments by buying in Reno—there was, he claimed, “NOTHING TO COMPARE WITH IT IN DC, FOR SURE PROFIT IN SMALL LOTS,” and urged readers to “BE WISE—BUY RENO LOTS.”³³¹ Real estate agents and speculators with landholdings in Reno and the surrounding area saw profit in Reno’s conversion, it seems, for one of two reasons: either they hoped they could sell the land to the government at a profit when the District or Congress appropriated money to turn it into a park, or they hoped that the partial conversion of Reno into parkland would drive up land prices on remaining housing in the area.

Throughout the first decade of the twentieth century, the NSCA pressured local officials to do something about Reno, and in 1909 the group made it clearer than ever before that it was troubled not only by conditions in Reno, but by the growth of Reno’s African American community. In April 1909, the *Washington Times* reported on the NSCA’s efforts to convince the District Commissioners that Reno was a public health threat to the whole District. The reservoir, the *Times* explained, was surrounded by a “colony of shanties” that NSCA members and other “residents of the northwest” had recently inspected. After their “close and protracted investigation into the possibilities of the situation”—during which, they specified, no one had actually seen any of these things occur—they reported that it was possible that, given Reno’s lack of sewer facilities, “waste material, dead animals, and anything else” had been thrown into the reservoir. Seeming to hint that human remains might lie at the bottom of the reservoir as well, the *Times* reported one local resident’s prediction that, were the reservoir drained, “a surprising condition would be found.” Despite their lack of evidence for their claims, NSCA members framed conditions in Reno as “serious in the extreme,” opining that “the people are entitled to protection against the possible evil.” Under the heading “The Association’s Plan,” the *Times* reported that the NSCA sought to convince the District Commissioners and Congress to purchase land for a park, with the purpose of “clear[ing] out this little colony of shanties about the reservoir.” The NSCA further underlined the urgency of doing something about the problem immediately: “The association points out that there are increases being made to the little group, and that if something is not done to clear them out the problem will become more difficult as time goes on.”³³² Intelligence about “the little group” was provided to the NSCA by a member of the Bangarter family—referred to as H. Bankerter by the *Evening Star*—who “live[d] on the old fort” and favored the NSCA’s plan to have Reno

³³⁰ “The Reno Subdivision—Regarded as Most Profitable for Small Buyers,” *Sunday Star*, April 8, 1906.

³³¹ “For Sale—Lots,” *Evening Star*, February 26, 1909.

³³² “Reservoir Water May Be Dangerous—Citizens Enter Protest Against Conditions Existing in Reno,” *Washington Times*, April 4, 1909.

acquired and turned into a park.³³³ Bangerter’s presence at this meeting serves as an indication of collaboration between white residents of Fort Reno and the local citizens’ groups like the NSCA that sought Reno’s destruction.

Over the course of the roughly decade-and-a-half since residents of Tenleytown and other Northwest neighborhoods had started lamenting conditions in Reno and lobbying for the neighborhood’s conversion, they had moved from describing conditions in Reno as a threat to residents of nearby neighborhoods to depicting them as a public health emergency that threatened the health of all residents of the nation’s capital. This change in messaging reflected the growing desire of the NSCA and residents of nearby neighborhoods to convert Reno into a park, and their seeming sense that to get action on Reno, they needed to craft an argument that depicted Reno as an issue that all Washingtonians needed to pay attention to. This 1909 *Times* piece represented the most strident, far-reaching argument for Reno’s conversion thus made, and it represented the clearest evidence so far that the NSCA objected not only to sanitary conditions in Reno, but to the presence of Reno’s African American community on the heights surrounding the reservoir. Somewhat unaccountably, however, around the turn of the decade, the NSCA seems to have dropped its immediate efforts to lobby Congress and the District Commissioners about Reno’s conversion.

Reno in the 1910s

While the reasons for the NSCA’s 1910s silence on the issue are not immediately clear, this period coincided with the heyday of the RCA and its efforts to improve conditions in the neighborhood. As detailed in the previous chapter, beginning in 1913, District-area newspapers began printing semi-regular updates on the activities of the RCA. While the RCA had a political agenda, it also sought to improve the state of sanitation, infrastructure, and education in the neighborhood. Groups like the RCA had been founded because white citizens’ groups had excluded Black Washingtonians from joining their ranks; Black civic associations addressed quality-of-life concerns in Black neighborhoods while serving as institutional bases from which Black residents of the District could stake their claims to equal membership in the body politic. Complaints about sanitary conditions and Reno’s infrastructure had been crucial to the NSCA’s arguments for the neighborhood’s conversion, and many of the RCA’s activities seem to have been designed to remedy the conditions that local whites cited when they argued for the neighborhood’s destruction. In short, while the RCA gave Reno citizens a place to come together to discuss matters of local importance and exert political muscle, it also became the main institution through which Reno-dwellers fought to save their neighborhood from destruction.

³³³ “Park Around Reservoir,” *Evening Star*, April 3, 1909.

Throughout the 1910s, the RCA met to address concerns related to public sanitation and infrastructure in Reno, either requesting city-funded improvements from the District Commissioners or reporting on Reno residents’ efforts to beautify their community. A report on a November 1913 meeting revealed that the RCA had formed a three-person committee on “improvements at Fort Reno” which was engaged in dialogue with the District Commissioners. This article also revealed the existence of committees on “Streets, sidewalks, sewers, water and lights” and “Health and sanitation” among the RCA’s standing bodies.³³⁴ In February 1915, Reno resident Thornton Lewis reported on the District Commissioners’ recent reply to a petition from the RCA’s improvements committee. The Commissioners responded that they had set aside funds to macadamize Davenport Street and would temporarily fix Howard Street until funds could be set aside for its macadamization; the RCA’s remaining requests, the Commissioners assured the group, “would be looked after.”³³⁵ In March of the following year, the RCA heard speeches about public health and sanitation. A Dr. W. E. Lewis warned Reno’s residents against several practices that degraded community health, including leaving doors and windows unscreened and spitting in public places; additionally, in a sign that the NSCA’s complaints about water-flow in the area had some basis, Lewis recommended to Reno residents that they “rid the neighborhood of swamps and standing water.”³³⁶

While imploring Reno citizens to improve health and sanitation standards in the neighborhood, the RCA continued to lobby the District Commissioners to do their part in providing the neighborhood with improvements that kept pace with those being made in other District enclaves. In October 1916, the RCA forwarded a laundry list of recommendations for improvements to the Commissioners, including the installation of guardrails and lights on local streets and the further improvement of local roads; Reno citizens had to wait nearly a year, but in September 1917 the RCA received a reply from the Commissioners indicating that the requested improvements had been ordered.³³⁷ Multiple notices indicated or implied that the RCA held meetings on a monthly basis, and it is clear that not all the organizations’ meetings received notice in the local press. That some did likely reflects the RCA’s desire to publicize its activities, as there exists no indication in any of these articles that correspondents from local newspapers attended these meetings.

³³⁴ “Needs of Fort Reno—Discussed at November Meeting of the Citizens’ Association,” *Evening Star*, November 20, 1913.

³³⁵ “Reno Association Meets—Resolutions Adopted Opposing Liquor Traffic,” *Evening Star*, February 14, 1915.

³³⁶ “Protest Made Against ‘Birth of a Nation’ Film,” *Evening Star*, March 11, 1916.

³³⁷ “Guard Rail is Urged—Citizens Want One at McPherson and Chesapeake Streets,” “Reno Citizens Elect Officers,” *Evening Star*, September 22, 1917.



Figure 14: 3909 Emery Place, early twentieth century. (Courtesy of National Park Service)

Rather, it seems that Reno residents knew they needed to publicize their efforts to improve their neighborhood’s public health and infrastructure because they understood that its existence was in jeopardy. Surely, the RCA took up its campaign of renovations to improve the lives of residents and the neighborhood in which they lived, but it seems that they did so with an eye to addressing the types of concerns that NSCA officials had cited as reasons for the neighborhood’s destruction. Just as the NSCA forwarded intelligence of its meetings to local papers, and thus informed the District’s population of its estimation of the problems in Reno and the reasons why Reno needed to be destroyed, the RCA took its case to the people, showcasing its efforts to improve community conditions. It seems that their efforts to raise public health standards and improve local infrastructure met with success: when the drumbeat resumed for Reno’s clearing in the 1920s, the arguments made by the NSCA, other local citizens’ associations and city officials desirous of converting Reno did not hinge on the public health concerns that had been the focus of anti-Reno agitation during the early years of the twentieth century.

Momentum Toward Conversion

The NSCA resumed its campaign to clear Reno with renewed vigor in the 1920s, but the idea that Reno should be purchased and converted had never really died. Twice during the 1910s, District surveyor Melvin C. Hazen had recommended the project: in a 1914 report to the Commissioners, he cited Reno’s narrow streets and lack of conformity to the city highway plan, which, he said, had stunted the development of one of the District’s most beautiful spots, as the reason why Reno should be cleared, and in 1919 he included Fort Reno among a list of areas intended to be turned into parks as part of the McMillan Plan which would be lost to private development if not acquired by Congress.³³⁸ Perhaps spurred on by Hazen’s support for the idea, the NSCA resumed its intensive focus on the issue in late 1920. In November of that year, the NSCA considered the proposal to clear Reno at a meeting held at Tenley School, at which, according to a tantalizing note included in the meeting’s write-up in the *Evening Star*, “Holders of the property which the District proposes to acquire for the proposed new park attended.” This may mean that African American and white residents of Reno had learned of the meeting and come to confront their antagonists, or simply that real estate developers with unimproved holdings in the Reno area, such as James B. Wimer or Harold Doyle, attended.³³⁹ Whether Reno’s residents attended this meeting or not, they seem to have been aware of it, as NSCA president and local segregationist leader Luther Derrick would later claim that in the nights after the meeting, unknown assailants threw rocks through the front door of his home and the home of another NSCA leader, and made the sign of a “skull and crossbones” on the front lawn of another NSCA leading light.³⁴⁰ Derrick offered no proof of these allegations.

Undeterred by these apparent signs of Reno’s discontent, the NSCA made a full report on its plan for Reno at its next monthly meeting. A committee of five, including Derrick, presented a draft bill providing for Reno’s acquisition which they planned to forward to Congress. The draft called for the District to acquire Reno, “improve the street plan in conformity with the permanent street plan of the District, lay sewers and water mains and resell the property to private individuals and agents.” Occasionally, during the decades of struggle over Reno’s fate, the white opponents of Reno’s continued existence betrayed that their real motivation in seeking the neighborhood’s destruction was to remove Reno’s African American community from a section of the city increasingly dominated by expanding white suburbs that catered to wealthy buyers. This meeting, and this

³³⁸ “Obtain Park Land Soon or Plan Will Fail,” *Evening Star*, September 9, 1920; “Would Have Tract Diverted Into a Park—District Surveyor Recommends that Section in Piney Branch Be Preserved by City,” *Washington Herald*, September 23, 1914.

³³⁹ “Report on Park Plans,” *Evening Star*, November 27, 1920.

³⁴⁰ *Acquirement of Reno Subdivision in DC: Hearings Before the United States Senate Committee on the District of Columbia, Sixty-Ninth Congress, first session, on June 2, 1926* (Washington: General Printing Office, 1926), 25–26.

draft bill, represents such a moment. This draft bill made no mention of turning Reno into a park, or of the desperate need of the expanding northwest neighborhoods for parks, schools, and recreation centers that only the seized acres of Reno could fill; this would soon become the rallying cry of the movement to destroy Reno, but it had not yet become so in December 1920. Rather, the NSCA simply asked the District to purchase the land, make additional improvements beyond those already secured by the RCA, and then sell the land to a new crop of owners or real estate developers who would, presumably, develop the remade subdivision along the lines of nearby white enclaves.³⁴¹

The NSCA kept up its intensive focus on the Reno issue into the next year, seeking hearings on the subject with the District Commissioners and with the House and Senate committees on the District of Columbia. At the NSCA’s March meeting, local physician and NSCA member John W. Chappell commented that, as it was, Reno “was practically a dump;” if Congress could acquire it, though, “it could be turned into an attractive park.”³⁴² In May, the NSCA’s committee on fine arts received a request to get Congress to improve the Fort Reno area, “which ha[d] been permitted to deteriorate.”³⁴³ The neighborhood was no longer a threat to the public health—its presence was simply undesirable. In June, the NSCA secured its hearing with the Commissioners, who sympathized with the NSCA’s request and conceded the desirability of converting Reno into a park, but who argued that the Reno project was less important than other land acquisition projects in progress. This response prompted, for the first time, members of the NSCA to make the argument that because the growing northwest suburbs lacked public park facilities, the Reno project was indeed urgent and deserving of immediate attention. Luther Derrick, speaking for the three-person committee that met with the Commissioners, replied that Reno’s conversion was “equally, if not more, urgent” than the other projects mentioned by the Commissioners, “because that section has no park.” Derrick added that his delegation’s purpose was to “impress upon the city heads the importance of advocating a park at Reno as soon as possible.” Befitting the NSCA’s newfound belief in their proposed project’s urgency, the NSCA seems to have met on the same day, or perhaps the day after, this Derrick-led committee met with the Commissioners, and instructed its “committee on Fort Reno” to draw up a new Reno bill to submit to Congress. The NSCA seems to have realized by this point that it would be difficult for its plan for Reno to gain traction with Congress if

³⁴¹ “Acquisition of Reno Discussed by Citizens—Bill Proposing Purchase of Subdivision by District to Go Before Congress,” *Evening Star*, December 11, 1920.

³⁴² “Urge Aid in Water Bill—Citizens Believe US and DC Governments Should Pay Share,” *Evening Star*, March 12, 1921.

³⁴³ “Discuss School at Tennallytown—Suburban Citizens Association Wants Hearing by DC Committee,” *Washington Herald*, May 14, 1921.

it simply represented the acquisition and sale of the land to new owners; thus, the NSCA yoked Reno’s conversion to what it hoped would be a more compelling argument: the scarcity of recreational facilities in Northwest Washington.³⁴⁴

As the decade continued, the NSCA acquired well-placed allies in its fight for Reno’s conversion. In 1922, the powerful Board of Trade weighed in on the side of the NSCA, when it called for the creation of a “National Capital park commission” to acquire land in Washington, Maryland, and Virginia for the fulfillment of the park and playground plan for the capital region. Created in 1889, the Board had been founded, in the context of District disenfranchisement, as an ostensibly non-partisan forum through which civic leaders could acquaint Congress with the District’s needs. Quickly, the Board developed a close relationship with the District’s governing commission: for a “long period . . . Board of Trade membership became almost a prerequisite for local leaders to be considered for a commissioner’s post.” It was, boasted founder Myron Parker in 1892, “practically a state legislature, city council and chamber of commerce combined into one.”³⁴⁵ The Board’s recommendation came from its committee on parks and reservations, which was chaired by Fred G. Coldren, who would eventually work for the National Capital Park Commission, and its successor, the NCPPC, which were the legislatively created institutional fruit of this recommendation.³⁴⁶ The list of sites that the proposed commission was recommended to acquire included Fort Reno and, when the NCPPC was created in 1926 and given a mandate to acquire land for the building of parks, public buildings, playgrounds, schools, and highways, Reno’s destruction figured into its plans.³⁴⁷

In 1924, Melvin Hazen renewed his support for Reno’s clearing, citing the previously voiced concern about its narrow streets being out of sync with the highway plan, the area’s value as a potential historic site, the fact that the Water Department wanted to expand its reservoir facilities in the area, and that public school authorities sought land in the subdivision for a junior high school. In addition to these concrete reasons, Hazen took another tack that became central to the argument to destroy Reno during the 1920s: that Reno was simply out of step with the general development of the Northwest quadrant of Washington. “The only way that this objectionable spot can be eliminated so that the city can develop in harmony with the surrounding territory,” according to Hazen, “[was] to condemn the entire

³⁴⁴ Derrick quoted in, “Plead for Park Before District Commissioners,” *Evening Star*, June 11, 1921. See also, “Citizens Boost Hawken for US Attorney Post,” *Evening Star*, June 11, 1921.

³⁴⁵ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 194–96.

³⁴⁶ Curiously, Coldren seems to have been involved in a purchase of Reno land some twenty years before he came to work for the NCPPC. In September 9, 1905, he and a business partner, Karl H. Fenning, were involved in the purchase of two lots in Reno from the Mount Asbury M. E. Church, of which Samuel Hebron was eventually a trustee. An Annie Fenning, likely Karl Fenning’s wife, was also involved. See Notice of Deed of Trust, Trustees of Mount Asbury M. E. Church to Fred G. Coldren and Karl H. Fenning, September 9, 1905.

³⁴⁷ Howard Gillette, Jr., *Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning and the Failure of Urban Policy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 123–127; “Park Commission is Urged for DC,” *Evening Star*, October 24, 1922.

area composed of 52 acres.” Hazen might have argued that, when he invoked the consideration of “harmony with the surrounding area,” he simply referred to Reno’s deviation from the highway plan, which was clearly part of his argument. But part of what made Reno so objectionable—indeed, a “blight” on the region—was the “cheap or modest character” of improvements made on the land since its 1869 subdivision which, Hazen explained, were the result of the “streets being too narrow to permit of standard improvements.”³⁴⁸ Consequently, other city officials and citizens’ associations representatives would further develop the argument that Reno was out of harmony with other Northwest neighborhoods, an eyesore in an otherwise beautiful section of the nation’s capital.

The NSCA continued its campaign for Reno’s conversion into the next year, recommending a plan for Reno’s conversion in April 1925 that included a park, junior and senior high schools, playgrounds, and the improvement of the reservoir. The Cathedral Heights Citizens’ Association gathered the next month to hear a report from Tenleytown police officer Lieutenant James L. Giles on the desirability of Reno’s destruction. Giles lived in Reno on Chesapeake Street but was a member of the NSCA, and his advocacy for Reno’s conversion represents another instance of a white Reno resident collaborating with the outside forces who wanted Reno gone.³⁴⁹ Giles explained to Cathedral Heights’ citizenry that Reno needed to be cleared and converted for its lack of conformity with the highway plan, which created dangerous traffic conditions, and the “unsightly condition” of its 146 houses. Giles also deployed the now mostly out-of-fashion argument that Reno was a menace to the public health. Giles’ argument on this score constituted something of a backhanded compliment to the efforts of the RCA to improve public health conditions and infrastructure, as he based it not on conditions prevailing in the streets or public areas, but on his claim that few Reno houses had water in them.³⁵⁰ The NSCA had the support of the Board of Trade—whose recommendations had resulted in Congress’ 1924 creation of the National Capital Park Commission for the express purpose of acquiring land for parks in the capital region—and other citizens’ associations were getting on board with the proposal as well. Sensing the momentum building behind the idea, and, having already conceded the general desirability of converting Reno into a park, the District Commissioners switched their position on the matter in late 1925.

³⁴⁸ “Conversion of Reno Subdivision Into Park, Recommended by Hazen,” *Evening Star*, August 28 1924.

³⁴⁹ The notion that white residents of Reno were working with the outside forces seeking to clear Reno is furthered by the fact that Giles and at least one member of the Bangerter family were members of the Northwest Suburban Citizens’ Association. Giles and Fred W. Bangerter were listed as members of a committee that attended the funeral services of a former NCSA member in July 1910. Giles and Bangerter chose to affiliate themselves with the white-run NSCA rather than the Black-run RCA. See “Funeral Services over Remains of H.S. Jones,” *Evening Star*, July 1, 1910.

³⁵⁰ “City’s Highest Site is Urged for Park,” *Evening Star*, May 15, 1925; Unites States Census, 1920.

In November 1925, the *Evening Star* reported that the Commissioners would recommend Reno’s conversion to Congress as one of the “new improvements for the National Capital.” The *Star* offered the usual justifications for Reno’s conversion—its historical value, its deviation from the highway plan, its elevation—but showed that the NSCA’s argument about the necessity of clearing Reno to provide recreational and school facilities for expanding white neighborhoods nearby had gained purchase: “Just east of this tract along Connecticut Avenue is a big residential real estate development, which makes school, playground and park facilities urgent.” The plan the Commissioners recommended included the reservoir’s enlargement, a junior high school, athletic fields, tennis courts, a public park, and Fort Reno’s “[p]reservation and restoration,” though how this last goal was to be accomplished was unclear. The plan, according to the *Star*, had the support of the City Planning Board (an advisory body to the National Capital Parks Commission) which had also given its assent. “Favorable action by Congress is expected upon this project,” the *Star* added.³⁵¹

As 1925 turned to 1926, the pace of events quickened, and momentum built behind the plan for Reno’s conversion. In December 1925, Representative Clarence McLeod of Michigan introduced a bill to appropriate \$1 million for the completion of a project molded on the Commissioners’ recommendations, to be funded jointly by the federal and District governments.³⁵² The Commissioners reported favorably on the bill in February, prompting District Commission president Cuno H. Rudolph to write to Frederick N. Zihlman, chairman of the House Committee on the District of Columbia, to recommend Reno’s conversion. Reno was, Rudolph explained, an “irregular, ill-devised subdivision [that] constitute[d] a blight upon this part of the District.” The territory surrounding Reno, he continued, was “being developed by high class residences;” furthermore, Rudolph considered it “evident to anyone who has made a study of the development of the District of Columbia that this point will be the heart and center of this section of the District,” and he warned that if the “very [rapid]” development of the surrounding neighborhoods was allowed to be slowed by this “misfit subdivision,” it would be “a great reflection upon those responsible for the preparation and development of the city plan.”³⁵³ Having thus been acquainted with the consequences of inaction, the next month a subcommittee of the House Committee on the District of Columbia heard testimony from DC Engineer Commissioner J. Franklin Bell on the topic. Bell detailed the various facilities that would be erected under the planned legislation, and he explained to the Congresspersons that the existing neighborhood of Reno was a “patchwork subdivision [that] is now growing up

³⁵¹ “Ideal Community Park is Projected on Fort Reno Site,” *Evening Star*, November 28, 1925.

³⁵² “Bill Introduced for Park Purchase,” *Evening Star*, December 11, 1925

³⁵³ Cuno H. Rudolph to Frederick N. Zihlman, February 3, 1926, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1926–1961, 5001-0 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.

there which is blocking highway development in accordance with the permanent plan for the Capital.” Bell went on to say that he had never heard any opposition to the proposal, which constituted “one of the finest ideas in proper city planning ever presented in the National Capital.”³⁵⁴ Bell had recently accompanied Senators William Cabell Bruce of Maryland and Senator Frederic M. Sackett of Kentucky on an inspection of, as the *Evening Star* termed it, “the so-called Fort Reno property.” The trio “expressed the hope that it would some day be made into an attractive park area.” Reno, the *Star* noted, was surrounded by “pretentious subdivisions on which expensive dwellings [were] being built.”³⁵⁵

Reno’s Day in Congress

Having been thus assured by a knowledgeable local official that no objections to Reno’s conversion existed, House District of Columbia Committee Chair Ernest Gibson was surely surprised on March 26, 1926, to be approached by three Black activists—James Lincoln Neill, Thomas A. Johnson, and Archibald S. Pinkett—as he marched to his committee room to favorably report the bill. Neill was secretary of the local chapter of the National Equal Rights League as well as a Howard-educated lawyer and businessmen. Along with his brother Lewis, he had begun purchasing land in Reno during the 1920s.³⁵⁶ Johnson was a Howard-educated clerk who likewise owned land in Reno. Like Neill, he was a non-resident Reno property holder, and he had purchased land in Reno and other neighborhoods twenty years earlier, at the time of his marriage, expecting to pass his holdings on to his children.³⁵⁷ Pinkett alone among the trio seems to have owned no property in Reno, but he was the secretary of the local chapter of the NAACP. Pinkett was also, like Neill, a Howard-educated attorney, and he had been appointed to a clerkship in the State Department in 1909.³⁵⁸ It is possible that Reno residents who worked in lower-level positions at the State Department or other nearby federal agencies knew Pinkett and alerted him to their plight;

³⁵⁴ Bell quoted in, “Favors Acquisition of Land in Fort Reno,” *Evening Star*, March 10, 1926; “Capt. Pecks is Retained on Police Active List,” *Washington Post*, February 3, 1926.

³⁵⁵ “Buying of Ft. Reno Site is Advocated,” *Evening Star*, March 7, 1926.

³⁵⁶ Flanagan, “Battle of Fort Reno;” “Bill to Condemn Ft. Reno Property Fought by Race,” *Washington Tribune*, April 9, 1926.

³⁵⁷ “Acquirement of Reno Subdivision,” 12; *Alumni Catalogue of Howard University, with list of incorporators, trustees, and other employees, 1867–1896* (Washington, DC: Union Alumni Association, 1896), 31. Records indeed indicate that Johnson purchased Reno land in March 1906. See, Notice of land transfer, Annie Hessick et vir., Edward W., to Thomas A. Johnson, *Washington Post*, March 17, 1906. See also, Notice of land transfer, Susan Bryan to Thomas A. Johnson, *Washington Post*, December 1, 1906.

³⁵⁸ “Bill to Condemn Ft. Reno Property Fought by Race,” *Washington Tribune*, April 9, 1926; Archibald S. Pinkett to W. E. B. DuBois, January 18, 1926, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst, available <https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b034-i533>; *Register of the Department of State* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1912), 98.

it is also possible that he learned about the campaign to clear Reno through his work with the NAACP and ties with activists like Neill. In any case, the three men who confronted Gibson on this March morning provided living testimony to the connections that Fort Reno’s citizens had forged to prominent Black Washingtonians living in other sections of the city.

The *Tribune* reported that property owners in Reno had gotten wind of the proposed legislation only recently, and that Neill, Johnson, and Pinkett had rushed to the Capitol in hopes of inducing Congress to give “the citizens of Ft. Reno . . . an opportunity to be heard on the matter.” With their quick response, the trio assured Reno citizens of their day in Congress, although they were unable to forestall the planned favorable report.³⁵⁹ The next night, the three activists spoke at a meeting of the RCA, as did several RCA members. The RCA adopted resolutions protesting the legislation, terming it “prejudicial to the interests of property holders of Ft. Reno.” The *Tribune* noted that the proposed legislation, “strange though it may seem, includes every piece of land owned by colored citizens in the vicinity.” As members of the RCA discussed the legislation, it developed that many had been approached recently and induced to sell their property by private real estate developers but had balked at the low prices offered. It seemed to members of the RCA that what local real estate developers had failed to achieve through their own offices, they had appealed to Congress and the District Commissioners to do for them, and that condemnation of Reno land—or forced sale of this land with condemnation as a looming threat—would result in Reno property holders receiving far less than market value for their holdings. The *Tribune* reported that when Congress again met to discuss the matter, “it is quite likely that a large delegation of property owners, both white and colored, will register objections to the legislation.” This last note serves as a reminder that, although outside interests focused on Reno’s Black population, Reno remained an integrated neighborhood, and suggests that attendance at RCA meetings reflected Reno’s interracial character.³⁶⁰

As in the spring of 1926 Reno residents prepared to do battle with powerful official and private interests over the fate of their homes, they received support from other nearby Black communities to which Reno residents had established ties over the preceding decades. A few weeks after he had gone with James Neill and Thomas Johnson to confront Ernest Gibson, Archibald Pinkett reported on Reno-dwellers’ fight to save their neighborhood before the Federation of Civic Associations (FOCA), an umbrella organization that

³⁵⁹ “Today in Congress,” *Evening Star*, March 26 1926. According to the *Star*, the “Subcommittee on parks and playgrounds of House District committee favorably report[ed] bill for establishment of a model civic settlement on the Fort Reno tract.” See also “Fort Reno Bill Given Approval,” *Evening Star*, March 27, 1926. Gibson did report to the House District committee several days later that “a delegation of citizens [of Reno] appeared asking to be heard.” The committee thus deferred action on the Reno proposal. The wording of the *Evening Star* article that recounted this meeting of the House District Committee suggested that another group of Reno-dwellers had approached Gibson on April 5. See “District Measures Given Approval,” *Evening Star*, April 5, 1926.

³⁶⁰ “Bill to Condemn Ft. Reno Property Fought by Race,” *Washington Tribune*, April 9, 1926.

brought together the capital’s “colored citizens associations.” “[T]he purpose of the negro federation,” declared the *Washington Post*, was “to benefit those most in need,” and, in April 1926, that included the members of the besieged Reno community. In addition to discussing “issues of the day as related to advancement of civic, social and political welfare of colored citizens,” the delegates assembled received an update from Pinkett on the “activities of colored citizens of Fort Reno in securing a fair price for properties which barely escaped condemnation last week for park purposes.”³⁶¹ Although no transcript of Pinkett’s report appears to have survived, the *Post* reporter’s phrasing suggests that, as far as Pinkett was concerned, saving the neighborhood was beyond question. The best that Reno-dwellers could hope for was to receive fair compensation for their homes and lots. Whether or not the *Post* characterized Pinkett’s view of the situation fairly, in the coming years, some Reno residents would focus primarily on getting their preferred prices; others, however, made it clear that they wanted to preserve the homes and the neighborhood they had labored so long to build. Later in the year, the FOCA did submit a protest about Reno’s treatment to the House Committee on the District of Columbia, though that protest focused on the District’s refusal to provide improvements to Fort Reno commensurate to those made with surrounding communities, rather than the movement to clear Reno. G.H. Richardson, the president of the FOCA, forwarded to the committee a report that branded Reno “a striking example of the policy of withholding from particular localities the absolutely basic essentials in the way of public improvements.” Though some of the RCA’s requests had met with success over the years, the FOCA asserted that Reno had been “passed up for years without public improvements, although surrounding localities have been amply provided for.”³⁶²

Reno residents themselves made their voices heard when the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia met to consider the Reno conversion legislation in June 1926, although they had to wait their turn: “[W]e will give you people all the time you want,” the Committee’s chair, Arthur Capper of Kansas, assured the assembled Reno-dwellers, but the supporters of Reno’s clearing spoke first. Representatives of the District government, local real estate developers and Northwest citizens’ associations informed the committee of the necessity for Reno’s clearing and conversion. Real estate agent Harold Doyle—who identified himself as the representative of the Chevy Chase Land Company (CCLC) in “all of the operations in that general neighborhood”—highlighted local white communities’ need for recreation and school facilities, and sounded the familiar note that conditions in Reno were out of step with those in developing white subdivisions: “Chevy Chase is a very

³⁶¹ “Civic Associations Honor Reelected Council Members,” *Washington Post*, April 16, 1926. Courtesy of Alcione Amos, Anacostia Community Museum

³⁶² *Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on the District of Columbia House of Representatives, Sixty-Ninth Congress, Second Session, Appointed to Investigate Affairs of the District of Columbia, Volume I*, 211.

well developed and a very highly developed community, and [Reno] is more or less a blight on the public development of the highway plan.”³⁶³ Melvin Hazen attempted to dodge questions from James Neill about land values in the area—though he did eventually admit that land values in nearby subdivisions were higher than what the city was offering to Reno landholders—while insisting that his only interest in the matter lay in clearing an “ill-shaped, ill-devised subdivision” that deviated from the highway plan. Speaking as the representative of the Chevy Chase Citizens’ Association, Procter Dougherty asserted that Reno represented “the only section in the immediate vicinity which is available” for the schools and parks his neighborhood so desperately needed, adding for good measure that unless Congress acted now, land prices would inevitably rise, and clearing Reno would cost the government more later. The NSCA’s Luther Derrick reiterated this claim, as he explained that he and his organization had been pressing city officials to clear Reno for six years, and that members of his association who owned land in the area could not do anything with that land until the government cleared Reno. The ground on which Reno stood should be one of the most beautiful spots in the District, he insisted, but instead it was a “blight, a sore on the body,” and should be cleared to “bring Chevy Chase and Cleveland Park right together at the highest point in the District.” The speakers urging Reno’s clearing and conversion advanced similar talking points and, when they sensed the hearing was going badly, they called for reinforcements. Early in the hearing, Melvin Hazen had referred to a letter in his possession from the National Capital Park Commission recommending the project, but, as the session wore on, Harold Doyle decided someone from the government needed to address the committee in person and called the NCPPC, which dispatched Major Carey H. Brown. Doyle and his allies surely hoped this additional government representative would add weight to their cause, but Brown said little that was new, though he did affirm that Reno’s acquisition and conversion into parkland would represent an important step toward the fulfillment of the 1901 Macmillan Plan. Doyle’s ability to call on and receive such speedy assistance underlined the extent to which Reno residents seeking to save their neighborhood were doing battle with an organized coalition of state-run, civil-society, and private organizations determined to clear Reno.³⁶⁴

³⁶³ The Chevy Chase Land Company and the village of Chevy Chase were founded by Senator Francis G. Newlands, who had used straw buyers and “front companies” to buy up land in Northwest Washington during the late nineteenth century. Newlands was “well known for his antipathy to black people.” He had once proposed a so-called “white man’s plank” for the Democratic Party platform, which would have disenfranchised Black voters and barred immigrants from Asia, because, he explained, ““this should be the white man’s country.”” Newlands also proposed deporting all Black people from the United States. The subdivision he founded did not officially bar Black residents, but its agents carefully screened home purchasers, and when promotional material designed to drum up interest in Chevy Chase spoke of “undesirable elements,” it was clear in the context of early 1900s Washington what that meant. See Asche and Musgrove, *Chocolate City*, 191, 220.

³⁶⁴ Quotations appear in, *Acquirement of Reno Subdivision*, 2, 5, 6, 7–8, 20–21; Flanagan “The Battle of Fort Reno.”

When Reno’s representatives had their turn to speak, they advanced several arguments against clearing Reno. James Neill highlighted the undemocratic nature of the effort to clear Reno. When Hazen referred to a previous meeting of the District Commissioners about Reno’s clearing, Neill asked whether Reno’s property holders had been invited and got Hazen to admit that Reno residents had not been “particularly consulted.” Neill and his allies also argued that the money being offered did not match the true value of their land. Thomas A. Johnson asserted that, “[T]hey can not get through this subdivision into Cleveland Park unless they wipe us off, and it is practically a hold-up.” Johnson characterized recent assessments of Reno land’s value at roughly 10 cents per foot as “unreasonably low, while [nearby land] values have gone up.” He also noted the seeming inconsistency between the low valuations given to Reno land and the argument made by Dougherty, Derrick, and others that if Reno land was not purchased now, its value would surely rise, and it would cost more later. It looked to Reno’s residents as though powerful local interests in the northwest citizens’ associations were leaning on allies in the District and federal governments to pass legislation that would allow them to acquire Reno land at artificially low prices, pegged to suspect recent valuations from the District assessor, rather than pay prices consistent with nearby landholdings on the open market. “[T]he proponents of this bill are related to the District in a way,” noted Johnson. Those speaking for Reno also pointed out the specious nature of Dougherty’s argument that Reno was the only land available on which to build parks and schools in the area. Reno resident James L. Warren explained that between Central High School and Reno lay “miles of vacant ground that could be taken for a junior high school without condemning a single house.” Moreover, asserted Warren, Reno, Chevy Chase, and Cleveland Park lay within easy walking distance of Rock Creek Park, where the government had “plenty of provision . . . for recreational purposes.” Neill likewise argued that plenty of available land for schools, parks, and any other purposes existed in Rock Creek Park, Cleveland Park, and Chevy Chase.³⁶⁵

Thomas Johnson expressed some willingness to sell if he could get a fair price—though he insisted he was “not anxious” to do so and had “some sentimental reason” for wanting to hold onto his property—but resident Reno property holders in attendance made it clear they had no desire to sell. When Capper asked Johnson whether “people generally there” would be willing to sell at a fair price, the response from the gallery was recorded in the transcript: “Cries of ‘No’ from many of those present.” Johnson then replied: “You hear them. They don’t want to sell. A great many of them say no.” James L. Warren added that he had just bought a home for \$8,000 in Reno the previous year, and he intended to keep it, even if he got that money back plus the value of the land. “I would not sell my home, because it took me all of my life to get it.” Like Johnson, he recognized that wealthy, well-connected interests wanted Reno gone—“These people who have lots of

³⁶⁵ *Acquirement of Reno Subdivision*, 5, 6, 11, 13, 15.

money want to run us out,” he stated—yet his determination to remain was steadfast: “That is my home, and I want to stay there.” Other Reno property holders expressed similar sentiments. “Homes?” asked Thomas Walker rhetorically. “You love your home. We love those places out there.” Samuel Hebron spoke as a trustee for the Mount Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church, which did not desire to sell its property, but he also expressed his pride in his home and his determination to keep it. Hebron had moved to Reno eleven years before, when he “could not get anything but a hollow out there.” Since, he had “labored hard and worked for it in the city, and walked in when I did not have car fare, and walked out there to buy my own home, and I don’t want to get rid of it.” Longtime Reno leader Thornton Lewis likewise represented Reno in a dual capacity: as vice president of the RCA, and as a Reno homeowner who had built a new house there the previous year. Seemingly referring to himself in the third person, Lewis told the committee that he was a “gentleman who has labored hard to get something good to look at, to build a nice brick house.” He implored the committee not to “cast him off, take away his home, and give him nothing to look at.” Lucinda Harper, whose aged husband Morris was unable to work, simply asked the committee what she was supposed to do when they took her home away. “If you condemn my home and put me out of doors with a crippled man, where will you all give me a place to stay?” she asked. “[I]f you take my home with all the improvements that I have made there on Davenport Street and turn me out of doors, would it be fair in the sight of Almighty God?”³⁶⁶

In imploring the committee to spare Reno, speakers for the neighborhood displayed pride in the community and its history. Although not a resident, Neill recognized how hard earlier generations of Reno-dwellers had worked to build themselves a home in the city’s then-remote northwest environs. The homes in question had “been acquired by the colored people who have lived there since 1867 or 1868.” Some were third and fourth-generation residents of the neighborhood; some had acquired the means to build “nice up-to-date convenient modern houses,” though he conceded that some lived in “huts and hovels.” No matter the condition of their homes, “their forefathers bought and paid for them . . . and they do not want to give them up and be forced out.” Reno residents, Thomas Walker explained, were not “speculators in land as is the Chevy Chase Land Co”; their “fathers and grandfathers” had gone “out there nearly 70 years ago . . . and built little houses, and they bought these lots and made this subdivision.”³⁶⁷ Walker was a non-resident Reno property holder who had been born enslaved in Alabama in the 1850s. Although a successful businessman, he had been forced to flee Reconstruction-era Alabama by a white lynch mob, emigrated to the capital, gotten a law degree at Howard, and started dealing in Reno real estate in 1897; in 1900 he had been part of Nelson Vale’s defense team

³⁶⁶ *Acquirement of Reno Subdivision*, 12–13, 16–17, 18.

³⁶⁷ *Acquirement of Reno Subdivision*, 14–17.

when Vale stood accused of murder.³⁶⁸ Reno’s residents, he continued, were the descendants of hard-working men and women who had “walked from [Reno] to the heart of the city in the morning, and . . . at the end of their day’s work . . . walked back out there.” Reno’s residents were not “edging up among people who are objecting to negroes around them.” They were “simply living there as good citizens, and they object to your taking their ground.” In these last comments, Walker got to the heart of the matter: Reno residents had sought out the Northwest to “get out of the way of the people that wanted to be rid of them;” now, however, “the people that wanted to be rid of them [had] followed them out there, surrounded them, and now they want to drive them out.”³⁶⁹

Neill laid bare the motivations behind the decision to clear Reno and replace it with white schools and recreational facilities. Neill told the committee pointedly that just as “every white gentleman” had spoken from the “white man’s standpoint,” he would speak “purely from a race standpoint.” Why did men like Doyle, Dougherty, and Derrick call Reno a blight? “Simply because negroes occupy it. They want a white settlement there.” Reno, he continued, “was the only place occupied by colored people between Chevy Chase and Cleveland Park . . . They want to get rid of the colored people, and if they were honest they would tell you so.”³⁷⁰

This was not the first time the movement to clear Reno had faced accusations of racial prejudice. In 1923, when Reno resident Richard Neal found that the District wanted to take his home on Davenport Street for the building of a new reservoir, he had enlisted the assistance of Emanuel Molyneaux Hewlett.³⁷¹ Hewlett was the son of Aaron Molyneaux Hewlett, the first Black professor at Harvard University; he had become the first Black graduate of Boston University’s law school and by the 1920s he had established a thriving law practice.³⁷² His connections to Reno dated to at least 1900, when he had served alongside Thomas Walker as Nelson Vale’s attorney, and he had purchased Reno land from Walker in 1901.³⁷³ Writing to Assistant Engineer Commissioner R. A. Wheeler, Hewlett noted the hard work the Neals had put into acquiring their house and supporting their family, and the injustice of trying to take that house from them in such a manner. Hewlett saw something larger at work in the District’s desire to take the Neals’ home: nearby,

³⁶⁸ Flanagan, “Battle of Fort Reno;” “A Murder Trial,” *Evening Star*, March 23, 1900; Notice of land transfer, Jane C. and Calvin C. Balls to Thomas Walker, *Evening Star*, April 16, 1897.

³⁶⁹ *Acquirement of Reno Subdivision*, 14–17.

³⁷⁰ *Acquirement of Reno Subdivision*, 14–15.

³⁷¹ See F.H. Stephens and George P. Barse, “In re condemnation of land [indistinct] for reservoir near Fort Reno, in the District of Columbia, *Evening Star*, October 29, 1923.

³⁷² “DC Law Said African Americans Could Eat Anywhere. The Reality Was Different,” *Washington Post*, February 13, 2018.

³⁷³ “A Murder Trial,” *Evening Star*, March 23, 1900; Notice of land transfer, Thomas Walker, et al., trustees to Emanuel M. Hewlett, *Evening Star*, October 21, 1901.

homes were being built by “white investors,” property values were climbing, and “colored people are asked to give their homes to the District . . . and an offer is made that amounts to a confiscation of their property.” Hewlett continued: “It seems queer that this particular section should be picked out, when there is so much land, as desirable owned by white men. While, Major, you may be perfectly innocent, [the Neals] and I feel that this is a move to get the colored people out of the neighborhood.”³⁷⁴ As previously noted, in its article on the Reno legislation and the efforts of Reno citizens to have their say before Congress, the *Washington Tribune* had also alluded to the racist motivations of the movement to clear Reno.³⁷⁵ But now Neill was taking the argument to Congress itself: “It seems the hand of oppression is still upon the negroes, and [white Washingtonians] are trying to force them to the wall.”³⁷⁶

In making this argument, Neill seems to have struck a chord. Senator Royal S. Copeland of New York, who led the questioning of witnesses for much of the hearing, had started off in a jovial mood, jokingly asking at one point if Reno were big enough for a golf course. But when Neill raised the issue of racial prejudice, Copeland defended the white witnesses who had spoken, saying he believed they had spoken from a “municipal standpoint.” Seemingly stung by the charge that his committee might be collaborating with a movement to ethnically cleanse the District’s northwest quadrant, Copeland interjected three times to say that the committee’s decision would not be based on race; he closed the hearing by asserting that “this committee is not going to decide this thing on the basis of whether white people or colored people live out there, but on its merits.” When Neill and others pointed out the difficulties that Black residents of Reno would have finding comparable housing in other sections of the District, Copeland embarked on an extended line of questioning about where the District’s Black residents went when forced out of their homes, whether their tendency was to scatter or group together in new developments. The transcript of this hearing suggests that, over the course of the proceeding, Copeland may have slowly grasped the racial dynamics of the controversy over Reno and come to see Black Reno residents as a group with needs, concerns, and desires as valid as those of the white residents who wanted Reno cleared. At one point, he asked plainly: “Are there any colored folks here who are in favor of this procedure, in favor of having this land condemned?” The transcript again records the response: “There were a number of negative responses and no affirmative.”³⁷⁷ Indeed, it seems that the delegation from Reno gained Copeland’s sympathy that day; three years later, during a subcommittee hearing on a

³⁷⁴ Emanuel Molyneux Hewlett to R.A. Wheeler, June 2, 1923. Courtesy of Neil Flanagan. Original located in Washington, DC City Archives.

³⁷⁵ “Bill to Condemn Ft. Reno Property Fought by Race,” *Washington Tribune*, April 9, 1926.

³⁷⁶ *Acquirement of Reno Subdivision*, 15.

³⁷⁷ *Acquirement of Reno Subdivision*, 3, 14, 19, 23, 25–26.

District appropriations bill, when the issue of using land in Reno for a new school came up, Copeland reiterated many of the arguments against clearing Reno that Neill, Walker, and others had made in 1926. Copeland wanted to know whether the local Black community opposed the measure, saying there were “certain human rights” that needed to be considered. “These people were not welcome here in the city, and they were driven out and sacrificed time and energy to get to [Reno], and they built up their homes, and, for my part, I should want to be very certain we are not causing tremendous inconvenience to that section of our population.”³⁷⁸

Reno citizens’ June 1926 protest was city-wide news. On the day after the hearing, the *Evening Star* reported that, “Vigorous protest against purchase of the Reno subdivision . . . was raised by a score of colored residents of that locality . . . ” The *Star* further explained that “[s]pokesmen for the colored property owners in the subdivision contended they did not want to sell their homes, even if they received a reasonable price . . . because they felt there was no other place they could go without paying more than they would receive.”³⁷⁹ Having brought their cause to the attention of newspaper readers in the District and nationally-elected representatives, Reno’s defenders were successful in 1926: the proposed legislation failed. But they were unable to save their neighborhood over the long term. The defeat of the 1926 legislation did not alter the reality that a powerful combination of government officials, real estate developers, and citizens’ association leaders wanted Reno cleared and converted. City officials still wanted to expand reservoir facilities in the Reno area and use land from Reno section for new junior and senior high schools, and powerful Northwest citizens associations still wanted the African American neighborhood gone. Land developers like Harold Doyle still had holdings in the area that they wanted the government to purchase, and the NCPPC continued to see the acquisition of Reno as a vital part of its mission to realize the vision of the McMillan Plan.

Reno’s Fate in the Balance

Under the leadership of Ulysses S. Grant III, the NCPPC assembled a top-flight staff of city planners and filed a series of ambitious reports, which envisioned a series of recreation centers across the District and the completion of the Fort Drive, which would connect the sites of prominent Civil War-era forts encircling the city. Reno figured into both visions. In a November 1926 memorandum on the Fort Drive, the NCPPC’s Fred G. Coldren acknowledged that building the Fort Drive would involve the destruction of homes. “It may be that in places, for short distances, it would now be necessary either to buy a few buildings and

³⁷⁸ *Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate, Seventieth Congress, Second Session on H.R. 16422* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1929), 18.

³⁷⁹ “Tourist Camp Bill is Given Approval,” *Evening Star*, June 3, 1926.

destroy them,” he conceded. “But by all means there should be no right angles, or sharp corners, but the roadway be so routed and marked from one end to the other that the driver will have no difficulty whatever in holding the Fort Drive and not wandering from it.” The destruction of Reno, which of course involved far more than simply the purchase and destruction of “a few buildings,” was in the eyes of the NCPPC a perfectly reasonable price to pay in their quest to answer, “the city dweller’s prayer for a park or parkway.”³⁸⁰

1928 saw the city acquire land in Reno for a new reservoir and the start of the NCPPC’s efforts to get Reno residents to sell and leave the area. In 1930, the District acquired the land that became the Alice Deal Middle School, and Congress passed the Capper-Cramton Act, which earmarked millions of dollars in funding for the NCPPC, thereby greatly increasing its power to purchase District land. Over the next two decades, the NCPPC would play the lead role in the destruction of Reno.³⁸¹

Internal discussions show that, from the beginning, NCPPC staff members were aware of the racial dimensions of the Reno issue. In a February 1928 meeting NCPPC staff discussed the Reno project, and that the building of the proposed facilities there would displace an existing community: the houses that would be affected, explained Carey Brown—the same Brown who had appeared before the Senate District of Columbia committee at Harold Doyle’s behest back in 1926—were “practically all occupied by colored families and are dilapidated run down shacks.” At the meeting, the NCPPC merely approved a plan in principle to purchase Reno and discuss it with District authorities at the next opportunity. Once the vote had been taken and recorded, Ulysses S. Grant III, the NCPPC’s Vice Chairman, Executive, and Disbursing Officer, explained in plain terms what had only been implied to that point: “There have been several attempts to get the colored out of there, and this is merely one way of doing it.” District Engineer Commissioner William B. Ladue suggested that the relevant agencies—meaning the NCPPC and the various District agencies interested in Reno land—each acquire the land they needed themselves, rather than involving themselves in “the big scheme, which is nothing but a land development scheme, with the idea of selling off afterwards what they do not want.”³⁸²

As plans to convert Reno proceeded in the late 1920s, Reno residents continued their struggle to save their neighborhood. In January 1927, Thomas A. Johnson and Samuel Hebron returned to Congress to plead their case, and this time they were joined by John F. Scott. They appeared before the House’s Special Subcommittee of its Committee on the District of Columbia, which was considering the same bill that had come before the Senate

³⁸⁰ Fred G. Coldren, “Memorandum on Fort Drive,” November 30, 1926, RG 46: Records of the US Senate, 69th Congress, Committee Papers, Including Hearings, Com. On the District of Columbia, Sen. 69A-F7, Various Subjects, Box 96.

³⁸¹ Flanagan, *Battle of Fort Reno*; Neil E. Heyden, “The Fort Reno Community: The Conversion and Its Causes” (Unpublished: Washington, DC, 1981), Box 28, Museum Resource Center.

³⁸² “Minutes of the 22nd Meeting of the National Capital Park and Planning Commission held on February 17, 1928,” 28, 34–35. Images courtesy of Neil Flanagan. Original available in Record Group 328, National Archives.

subcommittee in June 1926.³⁸³ Once more, Reno’s representatives proclaimed that they were being treated unfairly and did not want to sell. They reiterated arguments they had made the previous year about the government’s valuation of their land being suspiciously lower than the prices for which nearby land was selling and the availability of land nearby for the purposes of building new parks and schools. “It seems to me,” states Samuel Hebron plainly, “that it would be better for the Government to use the property that it owns . . . instead of going on Fort Reno and trying to disrupt people that are trying to live a higher and nobler life.” Hebron recounted the difficulties he had encountered in acquiring land and building his home:

Now, I went to Fort Reno some years ago [1915]. The place I bought was nothing but a deep hole. I have filled that in and on it there is a seven-room house with all modern improvements. Of course, I had to go down to the District Building and almost take off my coat to get them to put in water and sewer, but I have it . . . It is worth just five times as much as it was when I bought it, because there was a hole there before and now it is level with fruit trees and grass growing on it . . . I do not think that they ought to come on the fort and run us people off who are trying to build respectable homes, and I feel that is unjust and un-American.³⁸⁴

When given his turn to speak, John F. Scott sounded a similar note:

As a resident and a property owner of that place I object to taking Fort Reno for the very fact that it is my home, and when you take a man’s home you take everything . . . I bought out there some time ago, on Chesapeake Street. I have lived out there for 29 years. I went out there the winter before the blizzard. . . . My little home is there. It is no palace, but it has taken me a lifetime, up to the present time, to secure that. It has all modern improvements in it. I don’t want to sell it, and I don’t understand why they want this place for the public interests . . . I have got that home. I own it. I will never be able to get one like it. I have five rooms and a shed kitchen . . . and I have met every improvement that the District of Columbia has brought out there . . . I have fruit trees. We will live, if they will let us live. We are trying to live, but it seems as if it is the disposition to crowd us out everywhere we go.

³⁸³ *Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on the District of Columbia House of Representatives, Sixty-Ninth Congress, Second Session, Appointed to Investigate Affairs of the District of Columbia, Volume I* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Officer, 1927), 761–762.

³⁸⁴ *Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on the District of Columbia House of Representatives, Sixty-Ninth Congress, Second Session, Appointed to Investigate Affairs of the District of Columbia, Volume I* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Officer, 1927), 764–766

Scott did not want to sell, he claimed multiple times, but even if he did, the prices being offered were unfair. “It is just like if you were coming from your home, not disturbing anybody, coming home from your business and some fellow held you up and took everything that you have got.” Scott further informed the committeemen that Reno residents “were naturally suspicious of every move you gentleman make” and proclaimed that Reno-dwellers were “up and on our guard and doing. We have got our ears to the ground.”³⁸⁵

Two non-Reno-dwelling allies—the NAACP’s Archibald Pinkett and J. Milton Waldron, the pastor of Washington’s Shiloh Baptist Institute Church—joined Johnson, Hebron, and Scott in their appeal to the House subcommittee. Waldron was a longtime activist who, before coming to Washington, had spearheaded a boycott of Jacksonville, Florida’s segregated transportation system in the wake of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision and helped found the Niagara Movement alongside W. E. B. DuBois in 1905.³⁸⁶ Waldron’s connection to the case came from the fact that he was “pastor to a large number of the men and women who live in that section,” and his stirring statement invoked fundamental ideas of fairness and equality and of treating Black men and women who had shown loyalty to their country fairly. “[I]t appears to us,” asserted Waldron,

that you are to dispossess 300 colored citizens in order to put white citizens there and give them a school building. Now, these colored people have been living, many of them, 30 years in this section . . . I was on the committee that canvassed the District of Columbia for the sale of bonds, war bonds here, and for the encouragement of the mothers to let their boys go to the front to fight for world democracy, and the people of Fort Reno were as liberal in the purchase of bonds and as ready to let their sons go as the people in any other part of the District of Columbia, without regard to race or color, and then I want to call your attention to the fact that it appears that the assessor’s office and the street-improvement department are in collusion. They have allowed this property to go on and they have raised the assessment of property all around there, but the assessment on property of these people has not been raised to any appreciable degree. . . . Now, the land in the southern section adjoining on to this section from the south is now being held at \$3 a foot, and in most parts around there, and I understand from those who have been approached in the matter, some of our white citizens—well, they are told, ‘Well, the colored people will be moved away and this property will be worth not only \$3 a foot but be worth a great

³⁸⁵ *Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on the District of Columbia House of Representatives, Sixty-Ninth Congress, Second Session, Appointed to Investigate Affairs of the District of Columbia, Volume I* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Officer, 1927), 766–768.

³⁸⁶ “Waldron, John Milton,” *Jane Addams Digital Edition*, Ramapo University, available [http:// digital.janeaddams.ramapo.edu/items/show/2603](http://digital.janeaddams.ramapo.edu/items/show/2603).

deal more, because you will be rid of the colored people who are living here’ . . . these people are making an appeal to the legislature—really, that is what you are—of the District of Columbia, with the hope that you may give to them justice and see that they get what is right. . . . And, I am asking you gentlemen, is it possible that the Government of the United States in order to help somebody who wants to be prejudiced and perpetuate a wrong upon the hopeless, what they think is the hopeless people, is it right that this Government after asking for our sons and our money and everything else that we could give, to come in here and say, ‘Now, we are going to move these colored people away from here and we will put up a junior high school for white people, turn them out and use their property for tennis courts, swimming pools, and race tracks?’ . . . Then, gentlemen, let me remind you . . . that all of the wars of our country are not yet fought. You will need these Black citizens, and I think the treatment accorded them and the treatment accorded white citizens ought to be such as to make the citizens of the United States, without regard to color, willing to fight, and if need be, die for this country; but I submit such conduct as this and such things as this, as are sought to be perpetrated on these people will not encourage anybody to give their life and property for the defense of the Government that would be guilty of any such thing as this.³⁸⁷

The powerful statements made at this January 1927 meeting are worth considering at some length. Hebron and Scott spoke as Reno residents who longed to hold on to the homes they had worked so hard to build. Their pride in their homes and community may be glimpsed in the *ad hoc* histories they recounted of their purchase and improvement of Reno land, as well as in their descriptions of their dwellings and their yards. They had bought land in a desirable place to live at a time when land could be gotten there at an affordable price, and they had built homes that, if not palaces, as Scott said, they cherished dearly. They did not want to move, and they knew that the realities of the Washington real estate market were such that they would not be able to recreate these homes elsewhere; Scott “ha[d] fruit trees” at his home in Reno, and he knew that he would not be able to get fruit trees anywhere else in the District. Hebron and Scott’s moving appeals help the modern reader understand the attachment that Reno residents felt to their homes, and the pain they felt as those homes were ripped away. Waldron was an outsider to the Reno community, but he was a veteran activist committed to fighting for racial equality, and, after describing the conspiracy to clear Reno as he understood it, he linked the fair treatment that Reno deserved to the loyalty Reno’s citizens had shown to the United States during the

³⁸⁷ *Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on the District of Columbia House of Representatives, Sixty-Ninth Congress, Second Session, Appointed to Investigate Affairs of the District of Columbia, Volume I*, 770–771.

First World War. Going back to the antebellum period, Black leaders had publicly argued over whether, given slavery, disfranchisement, and discrimination, African Americans actually owed loyalty to the United States, and this conversation had sparked fevered debate in the Civil War-era North, when Black Northerners debated whether or not they should fight for the United States if given the opportunity to do so.³⁸⁸ Even in the wake of the war that was supposed to have made the world safe for democracy, this remained a relevant question, and Waldron asserted that Reno’s treatment constituted an example of why African Americans might hesitate to fight for the United States. Early in the twentieth century, forces that sought to clear Reno had contemplated turning the area into a military park under the supervision of the War Department; little could they have dreamed, one imagines, that Black activists might press the case to save the Fort Reno neighborhood before Congress by arguing that the conversion of Reno would betray American ideals and the loyal Black men and women who had given the nation their funds and their lives during a time of crisis. Like the June 1926 protest to the House District Committee, this protest by Reno-dwellers and their allies was city-wide news, with the *Evening Star* noting the, “vigorous protest made by a delegation of colored landowners in the Mount Reno district.”³⁸⁹

³⁸⁸ See Brian Taylor, *Fighting for Citizenship: Black Northerners and the Debate over Military Service in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

³⁸⁹ “Mt. Reno Residents Protest Model Plan,” *Evening Star*, January 15, 1927.



Figure 15: Houses on Ellicott Street, early twentieth century. (Courtesy of National Park Service)

Alongside their efforts to sway Congress, Reno citizens took to the District courts to press their claims. James and Lewis Neill, working alongside Thomas A. Johnson and Samuel Hebron, fought the District’s effort to condemn portions of the Reno subdivision and convert them into land for a school for white children. In a May 1929 petition to the District Supreme Court in the names of Lewis Neill, Johnson and Hebron, attorneys Johnson—who represented himself—James Neill, and Royal A. Hughes stated plainly, “That racial prejudice, and not the public good, nor for the purpose stated [use of the land to build a junior high school for white children]; is the underlying motive prompting the effort to condemn the said property.”³⁹⁰ Johnson and Neill were veterans in the struggle to save Reno by this point; Hughes was a graduate of Howard Law School who had by the 1920s become one of the District’s most prominent Black attorneys.³⁹¹ This impressive

³⁹⁰ Petition of Lewis H. Neill, Thomas A. Johnson and S.W. Hebron to the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia, May 22, 1929, RG 21, Records of the District Courts of the United States, Condemnation Case #1972. Courtesy of Neil Flanagan.

³⁹¹ J. Clay Smith, Jr., *Emancipation: The Making of the Black Lawyer, 1844–1944* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 170.

array of legal talent crafted a compelling brief, and they repeated some of the arguments they and other Reno-dwellers and their allies had made before Congress in 1926, claiming that there was nearby land available, some of it already in the possession of the CCLC, which would satisfy the need for a white school without destroying a Black neighborhood. They highlighted the fact that condemnation would ultimately involve the shuttering of cherished community institutions, including “a school for colored children, [and] a church for colored worshippers.” They spoke of the hardships that displaced residents would face in finding new homes to purchase or rent, asserting that “dozens of colored citizens [would be left] homeless” by the proposed condemnation. “To permit the condemnation of the land sought[,]” they explained, “would be to wipe out a colored settlement occupied by colored citizens for more than two or three generations . . . who, by their industry and thrift have bought this land, and established and maintained their homes.”³⁹²

The following month, Johnson, Hughes, and James Neill amended their petition, and in the names of Johnson, Hebron, and Lewis Neill explained to the District Supreme Court that Congress had already heard arguments about the purchase and conversion of Reno and “heeding the protest of the colored residents of the said Reno section, refused, more than once, to enact the legislation sought.” They then explained to the District Supreme Court that Reno was the target of a conspiracy into which District and federal officials had both entered. “There is now a concerted action,” they stated,

on the part of the officials of the United States Government and the officials of the District of Columbia, to obtain all of the property of the colored residents in the said Reno section, either by purchase or condemnation, for alleged public park or school purposes, and thus drive the colored population from the said Reno section . . . this is an attempt on the part of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, to do indirectly what the Congress of the United States, has repeatedly refused to allow them to do directly.³⁹³

Earlier that year, Johnson had returned to Congress to make similar arguments before a subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Appropriations, which had convened on January 29, 1929, to discuss the District appropriations bill for the following year. He sounded many of the same notes he had in 1926 and that he would include in his twin 1929 petitions, highlighting the availability of suitable land nearby and the unfair prices being

³⁹² Petition of Lewis H. Neill, Thomas A. Johnson and S.W. Hebron to the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia, May 22, 1929, RG 21, Records of the District Courts of the United States, Condemnation Case #1972. Courtesy of Neil Flanagan.

³⁹³ Petition of Lewis H. Neill, Thomas A. Johnson and S.W. Hebron, June 10, 1929, RG 21, Records of the District Courts of the United States, Condemnation Case #1972. Courtesy of Neil Flanagan.

offered to Reno-dwellers.³⁹⁴ Johnson came that day backed by powerful allies: the NAACP’s Archibald S. Pinkett returned to speak for Reno and its citizens, and he was joined by a newcomer to the struggle, Neval H. Thomas, a Black history teacher at Dunbar High School who had served on the NAACP’s national Board of Directors since 1919 and presided over the NAACP’s District branch since 1925.³⁹⁵ Referring to Reno, Thomas explained to the members of the subcommittee that, “There is a negro settlement out there and for years an attempt has been made by real estate people and other white residents there to remove those negroes from the property they have enjoyed for more than two generations.” The NAACP leader asserted that it was wrong for “a great group of citizens doing their duty” to have “its interests left at the absolute mercy of another group, especially when they are simply aiming at real estate values . . . ” Thomas implored the subcommittee to situate the proposed school for white children in a location that would not involve Reno’s destruction, movingly intoning: “save us at Reno. Save us there by designating the location of the white school you are to appropriate for so they can not take little Reno away from us.”³⁹⁶

In addition to taking their case to Congress and the District Court system, Reno-dwellers seem also to have protested to the DC Board of Education, as, in his comments on the proposed “Junior High School Near Reno Reservoir,” District Public School Superintendent Frank Ballou referred in 1929 to the “objection . . . made at the meeting of the Board of Education . . . on the part of the colored citizens . . . whose property is being acquired, either by purchase or condemnation.”³⁹⁷ Efforts such as this did not save Reno in the long term, but they did buy Reno residents time. The efforts of Reno-dwellers and their allies to make clear Reno citizens’ desire to preserve their homes and neighborhood had made an impression on District Engineer Commissioner William Ladue, who, at a 1929 meeting of the NCPPC, referred to the “harsh questions” posed by a “delegation of colored friends from [Fort Reno] who protested to the Senate Committee.” Their protest had “raise[d] the general question of the operations of the government being directed toward eliminating their homes.” Neil Flanagan has characterized Ladue’s comments as “one of

³⁹⁴ Johnson’s comments can be found in *District of Columbia Appropriations Bill for 1930: Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate, Seventieth Congress, Second Session, on H.R. 16422* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1929), 97-99.

³⁹⁵ Marshall Hyatt, “Neval H. Thomas and Federal Segregation,” *Negro History Bulletin* 42, no. 4 (October-November-December 1979), 100.

³⁹⁶ *District of Columbia Appropriations Bill for 1930: Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate, Seventieth Congress, Second Session, on H.R. 16422* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1929), 94-95.

³⁹⁷ Ballou quoted in *District of Columbia Appropriations Bill for 1930: Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate, Seventieth Congress, Second Session, on H.R. 16422* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1929), 45-46. On Ballou, see “School History,” Ballou Senior High School, available https://www.balloudc.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=207313&type=d&pREC_ID=407875.

the few breaks [Reno] got.”³⁹⁸ Perhaps chastened by Ladue, the NCPPC’s Ulysses S. Grant III proposed to, for the moment, concentrate on acquiring vacant lots on the west end of Reno.³⁹⁹ The NCPPC made offers and bought property in Reno throughout the 1930s and, as will be seen below, used pressure tactics while doing so, but before 1937 it only acquired one home through condemnation proceedings. Reno-dwellers’ efforts did not save Reno, but they did delay its clearing, and perhaps prevented the NCPPC from using even more draconian tactics to have its way. Community residents like the Scotts and Hebrons thus afforded themselves more time to enjoy their homes, figure out how to extract the best possible prices for their dwellings, and find new places to live.⁴⁰⁰ Thus it was that Harold Doyle wrote to the NCPPC’s John Nolen in 1938 that, while most of the vacant lots in Reno had been purchased already, “the portion more fully built upon and occupied by negroes still remains.”⁴⁰¹

“Nothing but a Land Development Scheme”

Just as Neval H. Thomas identified real estate interests as a prime factor in the effort to destroy the Reno community, in its 1926 report on Reno residents’ efforts to get a hearing before Congress, the *Washington Tribune* had reported that Reno’s “colored citizens” were fighting to “forestall being driven from their homes by what appears to be the sinister influence of real estate developers.”⁴⁰² In a steady stream of correspondence to District and NCPPC officials over the course of the 1920s and 1930s, Harold E. Doyle revealed the role played by the CCLC in the movement to destroy Reno, and of its racial motivations for doing so. Doyle worked for the Thomas J. Fisher Company (TJFC), a real estate concern which acted as the agent of the CCLC in its dealings in the area. In a 1923 letter to Engineer Commissioner J. Franklin Bell, Doyle explained the connection between the TJFC and the CCLC, that he had worked for Fisher for thirty years, and that a large portion of his personal real estate holdings lay in Reno.⁴⁰³ A month earlier, Doyle had written to Chief of Engineers Lansing H. Beach to convince Beach to reconsider the placement of the new

³⁹⁸ Ladue and Flanagan quoted in Flanagan, “Battle of Fort Reno.”

³⁹⁹ Extract from the Minutes of the 32nd Meeting of the National Capital Park and Planning Commission held on April 25, 1929, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1926–1961, 5001-0 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.

⁴⁰⁰ Flanagan, “Battle of Fort Reno.”

⁴⁰¹ Harold E. Doyle to John Nolen, Jr., July 10, 1938, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1926-1961, 5001-0 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.

⁴⁰² “Bill to Condemn Ft. Reno Property Fought by Race,” *Washington Tribune*, April 9, 1926.

⁴⁰³ Harold Doyle to J. Franklin Bell, December 4, 1923. Courtesy of Neil Flanagan. Originals available at Washington DC City Archives.

reservoir to be built in the Reno section. He, the TJFC, and the CCLC “desire[d] to eliminate the unsightly buildings and hodge-podge of subdivision known as Reno” and improve it with “the best class of houses.” In 1913, Doyle explained, he had helped create a “little syndicate” to buy up lots in Reno that could be purchased at advantageous prices, with the intention to hold them and wait for the “ultimate abandoning of the old subdivision and substitution of the new one.” This syndicate seems to have included numerous prominent bankers and to have represented an informal but potent combination of private real estate and banking interests. In May 1926, Doyle wrote to Procter Dougherty, the powerful Chevy Chase Citizens’ Association leader who would soon be named to the Board of Commissioners, seeking help from the Citizens’ Association in getting the Reno bill through Congress. In this letter, Doyle claimed many of the District’s “most important citizens [were] familiar with it and favor of it.” Doyle knew this because “three or four years” earlier he had met in secret with several prominent local bankers, including Charles Glover, Edward Stellwagen, Charles J. Bell, John J. Lerner, and John Joy Edson, “and many others. . . for the purpose of looking into the [Reno] matter.”⁴⁰⁴ By 1923, according to Doyle, his syndicate controlled between two hundred and three hundred lots and was intent on buying more; in the 1926 hearing before the Senate District of Columbia committee, Reno resident Thomas A. Johnson testified that it was Doyle who had offered him fifty cents per acre for his land. During the time Doyle and the other members of his syndicate had been buying up Reno property, they had “work[ed] out a number of schemes either to totally eliminate the present subdivision or to take steps to eliminate it piecemeal,” giving as an example the widening of Fessenden Street and its improvement between Connecticut Avenue and Belt Road.⁴⁰⁵

The movement to convert Reno into parks, schools, and playground facilities may have upset Doyle’s original plan, but in the 1920s he adapted to this new reality and sought to interest the NCPPC in as much of his land in and around Reno as possible, sometimes using the threat of building new homes for Black families as leverage. He had begun correspondence with Carey H. Brown as early as February 1926, acquainting Brown with his past efforts to convert Reno and urging the commission to purchase as much Reno land as possible. The matter was urgent, he explained, because, “Reno property ha[d] been materially increase[ing] in value” for two to three years, owing to the fact that it was “directly in line with Washington’s best growth.”⁴⁰⁶ This statement, of course, testified to the truth of the contentions made by Thomas A. Johnson and others in their various congressional

⁴⁰⁴ Harold Doyle to Procter Dougherty, May 26, 1926. Original found at Historical Society of Washington. Image available courtesy of Neil Flanagan.

⁴⁰⁵ Doyle quoted in Harold Doyle to Lansing H. Beach, November 7, 1923. Original found at District of Columbia Archives. Image available courtesy of Neil Flanagan. See also *Acquirement of Reno Subdivision*, 13.

⁴⁰⁶ Harold Doyle to Carey H. Brown, February 18, 1926, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924-1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 45, A1-E18.

testimonies that Reno land was being artificially undervalued to ease the process of its purchase. In a December 1926 missive, Doyle urged Brown to lobby Congress on Reno’s purchase and conversion, explaining that, “There is no single thing, in our opinion, that could be done for the District of Columbia, as important as this,—outside of probably the right to vote.”⁴⁰⁷

In a December 1929 letter to NCPPC secretary Fred G. Coldren, Doyle implored the commission to purchase land that he and his associates owned in the area. The NCPPC would need to purchase the land at some point, he said, and its value would only rise with time; if, however, the commission decided not to purchase it, “the owners will have to sell for the building of houses for negroes.” His office, he explained, was “very vitally interested in the elimination of this negro sub-division,” but wanted the “job done . . . thoroughly”—otherwise, it would be of little benefit to the CCLC.⁴⁰⁸ The next month, Doyle wrote Coldren again to warn him that the owners of these properties were “contemplating the building of houses for colored.”⁴⁰⁹ During the early 1930s, the NCPPC began acquiring vacant lots on the western edge of Reno and convincing white absentee landlords to sell, but by the latter years of the decade much of the Black neighborhood that Doyle detested remained.⁴¹⁰ Thus, in 1938 Doyle wrote to the commission’s director of planning, John Nolen Jr., to urge a plan whereby the District would take over the area in the name of slum clearance until the NCPPC was ready to purchase it. “There would,” he opined, “seem to be no good reason to retain this comparatively small area for the use of colored, especially on such narrow streets and occupied by poor small frame houses, some of which are more or less tumbling down.” Besides, the “general character of the occupancy” was low—Doyle claimed to be in possession of a list of a dozen bootleggers who had operated in Reno during Prohibition—and the price to the government would be shortly made up through increased taxes.⁴¹¹ The files of the NCPPC contain records of numerous land deals involving Doyle and his associates, as NCPPC officials worked over the course of the 1930s to complete the conversion of Reno that Doyle had worked so long to effect.

⁴⁰⁷ Harold Doyle to Carey H. Brown, December 3, 1926, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.

⁴⁰⁸ Harold Doyle to Fred Coldren, August 26, 1929, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 45, A1-E18.

⁴⁰⁹ Harold Doyle to Fred Coldren, January 9, 1930, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 45 A1-E18.

⁴¹⁰ Flanagan, “Battle of Fort Reno.”

⁴¹¹ Harold Doyle to John Nolen, Jr., August 1, 1938, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 44 A1-E18.

The Destruction of Reno

Although the NSCA—now renamed the Friendship Citizens’ Association (FCA)—had failed to secure passage of the comprehensive legislation for Reno’s acquisition and conversion it had championed in the mid-1920s, by the early 1930s it had won, even if Reno’s elimination would not proceed as quickly as its members might have preferred. The FCA’s monthly newsletter, *Top Notch*, covered the movement of the Capper-Cramton Act through Congress with breathless anticipation. In a March 1929 article, the FCA sheet predicted that “Fort Reno[’s] purchase [was] sure” if the legislation passed, looking forward to the day when “this most unsightly and valuable spot” would be “redeemed from its present state of dilapidation.”⁴¹² If passed, according to *Top Notch*, Reno would no longer be “the rendezvous of bootleggers,” but would be devoted to “school, park and playground purposes.”⁴¹³ In January 1930, as the bill’s passage seemed increasingly likely, *Top Notch* rejoiced that the NCPPC’s piecemeal acquisition of properties could end, and that “final redemption of the finest and most sightly tract of land in the District from its present condition of dilapidation is in sight.”⁴¹⁴ The FCA’s publication made no mention of the resulting displacement of Reno’s residents, nor did it discuss the residents’ welfare. In using the term “redemption” to describe Reno’s clearing and conversion on multiple occasions, the FCA’s mouthpiece deployed the same term that white Southerners had used to describe the process by which they overthrew Reconstruction-era state governments, which Black voters had helped elect and in which Black men had served in places of official distinction. For white Southerners in the 1870s, redemption had been about defeating Black political power; white Washingtonians had undercut Black political power decades earlier when they had disenfranchised District residents and inaugurated government by commission, but not until the 1930s did they achieve the residential segregation they sought. It may have, of course, been coincidental that the author of this *Top Notch* piece used the term “redemption” to describe its conversion; it is also possible that the term was meant as a deliberate signal to *Top Notch*’s readership. In either case, to modern eyes, the term may seem appropriate given the racial dynamics of the struggle over Reno’s fate.

Over time, the NCPPC developed a plan for approaching Reno property holders whose homes and land the commission sought to purchase. In December 1935, commission members discussed the regular procedure. First, commission representatives would offer to purchase a property at the valuation the Washington Real Estate Board (WREB)

⁴¹² “Crampton [sic] Bill Loans 16 Millions for Parks,” *Top Notch*, March 1929. Image courtesy of Neil Flanagan. Original available in Washingtoniana Room, DC Public Library.

⁴¹³ “Money Now Available for New Parks,” *Top Notch*, June 1930. Image courtesy of Neil Flanagan. Original available in Washingtoniana Room, DC Public Library.

⁴¹⁴ “Cramton Bill Again Before Congress,” *Top Notch*, January 1930. Image courtesy of Neil Flanagan. Original available in Washingtoniana Room, DC Public Library.

had assigned it.⁴¹⁵ NCPPC officials insisted that these property valuations in Reno be kept secret; in October 1935, Norman Brown (then the NCPPC’s appraiser and associate land purchasing officer) instructed WREB President T. Eliot Middleton that these figures were “highly confidential” and not to be “discussed with, or communicated to, anyone not making the appraisal.”⁴¹⁶ When a Reno-dweller rejected selling at the WREB’s valuation, commission agents then attempted to ascertain the lowest price at which he or she would be willing to part with the property and then forwarded that figure to the Land Purchasing Officer of the NCPPC along with a recommendation.⁴¹⁷

When the NCPPC began to solicit land purchases in Reno, Reno residents and property holders entered an era of uncertainty and anxiety. During this period, as they had during the previously mentioned 1926 meeting of the RCA, Reno-dwellers and property owners reported being hounded by real estate agents. In August 1928, George Cooper, who owned two Reno lots, wrote to Carey Brown seeking information on the NCPPC’s plans. “I have been getting so many inquiries as to the asking price that I thought there must be something in the wind in the very near future.”⁴¹⁸ In April 1931, Percy L. Conrad of New Jersey wrote to NCPPC Land Purchasing Officer H. Tudor Morsell to complain that his mother, Elizabeth, had been harassed about her home in Reno for over a year by a man named Walter Jarvis. He accused the NCPPC of using private real estate agents to get Reno property holders to sell at the prices desired by the government and of using pressure tactics against his aged mother, including at one point giving her “24 hour notice with alternative of condemnation proceedings within the next few days.”⁴¹⁹ Lillie R. Hurley of Virginia likewise took up for a relative, May King, who lived in Reno and was bewildered

⁴¹⁵ “Extract from Minutes of the 104th Meeting of the National Capital Park and Planning Commission, Dec. 20–21, 1935,” RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1926–1961, 5001-0, Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.

⁴¹⁶ Norman Brown to T. Eliot Middleton, October 30, 1935, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.

⁴¹⁷ “Extract from Minutes of the 104th Meeting of the National Capital Park and Planning Commission, Dec. 20–21, 1935,” RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1926–1961, 5001-0, Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.

⁴¹⁸ George Cooper to Norman Brown, August 15, 1928, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 45 A1-E18.

⁴¹⁹ Percy L. Conrad to H. Tudor Morsell, April 1, 1931, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 45 A1-E18.

by the steady string of visitors inquiring about her property: “She writes me that there have been several men there to look at her place, from the government, so she says, but she so often misunderstands being so hard of hearing.”⁴²⁰

Indeed, the NCPPC had engaged private real estate agents to help convince Reno-dwellers and property holders to sell at what the commission considered acceptable prices; these agents, and the NCPPC officials who engaged them, applied pressure to Reno land-owners. In November 1930, Kirby Kibler of the real estate department of the Munsey Trust Company informed Morsell of his progress relative to the “properties you gave me to purchase on Ellicott Street.” His work was going slowly, both because the owners he had spoken with wanted more money than he had been instructed to pay, and because some were “indifferent as to whether to sell or not.” Kibler believed that he and his associates had “worked these people sufficiently for the time being” and should “[hold] aloof” for a while to see if some might be willing to lower their prices.⁴²¹

What, exactly, Kibler meant by “work[ing] these people” was left unstated, but it is likely that he was referring, at least in part, to using the threat of condemnation to induce Reno property holders to sell. Indeed, NCPPC officials used the looming threat of condemnation as leverage in communications with Reno landholders, and in internal memos NCPPC officials discussed applying “pressure” and strategies to get various individuals and groups to sell.⁴²² Writing to Lewis Neill in October 1930, Morsell asserted that he was “cleaning up as much of this section as is expedient and will put the remaining properties in condemnation at once . . . Unless I hear from you in a reasonable short time, I will assume that you wish to go to condemnation and will order same without further notice to you.”⁴²³ That same month, Morsell informed William H. Linkins, who represented clients with property in the area, that the NCPPC had acquired most of the land it wanted in the area, and was readying condemnation proceedings. “Unless your clients desire to go into condemnation, I would suggest that you see me within the next day or two,” wrote

⁴²⁰ Lillie Hurley to G. L. Bunnill, December 2, 1935, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 46 A1-E18.

⁴²¹ Kirby Kibler to H. Tudor Morsell, November 14, 1930, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.

⁴²² Quotation appears in Norman Brown to T.S. Settle, February 14, 1936, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18. See also, Norman Brown, “Memorandum for Mr. Nolte,” August 15, 1936, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 46, A1-E18.

⁴²³ H. Tudor Morsell to Lewis Neill, October 28, 1930, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 47, A1-E18.

Morsell.⁴²⁴ Although the NCPPC was at times forced to deal with groups of Reno citizens—such as when it sought to purchase land owned by institutions like Rock Creek Baptist Church—NCPPC officials understood that they needed to keep Reno property owners from banding together to try to save their neighborhood or extract fair purchase prices, as they had during the 1926 hearing before the Senate District of Columbia committee. In May 1948, as NCPPC officials worked to clear out the last Black property owners in Reno, commission official C. R. Nolte reviewed a letter to be sent to landholders and suggested that a reference to “each owner” be deleted. “I suggest that the owner only be addressed. This will prevent them from getting together,” he explained.⁴²⁵ NCPPC officials discussed numerous ways of inducing reluctant property owners to sell. In November 1930, Tudor Morsell pondered the problem posed by Charles Burgin, a Black entrepreneur who ran a lunch room out of a house on the corner of Ellicott Street and Belt Road. Burgin’s business made him reluctant to sell the property, but Morsell speculated that the lunch room “might be non-conforming,” and then asked, “Can we break up this business?”⁴²⁶ What breaking up this business might have meant, Morsell left unsaid, but Burgin sold his holdings in Reno the NCPPC in 1935 for \$6,500.⁴²⁷

⁴²⁴ H. Tudor Morsell to William H. Linkins, October 22, 1930, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.

⁴²⁵ C.R. Nolte to T.S. Settle, May 6, 1948, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.

⁴²⁶ H. Tudor Morsell to Capt. Chisholm, November 13, 1930, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.

⁴²⁷ Charles J. Burgin, Land Purchase Contract, October 18, 1935, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1926–1961, 5001-0 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.



Figure 16: Charles Burgin’s home, from which he ran a lunch room, circa 1930s.
(Courtesy of National Archives, NAID 17368312)

As momentum to destroy Reno built during the 1930s, residents did not give up their struggle; instead, by the middle of the decade, they saw that the struggle had entered a new phase. They had mobilized in 1926 to save their community, to prevent its condemnation and conversion into parkland and facilities for residents of nearby white enclaves. Their protest had helped defeat that round of legislation aimed at clearing Reno, but they saw that their victory had been temporary, and that the powerful forces bent on Reno’s destruction had simply changed tack. “I know that the Government will have [my lots in Reno] and it is useless for me to try to prevent it,” confessed Lewis Neill to Fred G. Coldren in September 1929.⁴²⁸ Rather than saving their neighborhood from destruction, by the late 1920s and early 1930s most Reno residents focused on getting fair compensation from the government. With the country mired in the depths of the Great Depression, Reno-dwellers concentrated on getting enough money out of the government to ensure their continued survival. Given the power dynamics in play, sometimes the best they could do was to appeal to the basic principle of fairness and ask NCPPC officials to give them just compensation for the properties they had worked so hard to purchase and maintain. In November 1934, May King told NCPPC Landscape Architect T. C. Jeffers how she and her husband had purchased their home in 1925 and kept it through a “great deal of work and privation Even last winter when my Husband was out of work, on the Emergency Relief Roll, we held on.” Their “hard years,” she believed, entitled her and her husband to \$5,500 for their property; it was “a matter of fairness,” wrote her sister Lillie Hurley, who said that the money the Kings had been offered was too meager “to compensate them for all those years of struggle to hold on to a place they hoped would some day be their own”⁴²⁹ In January 1936, Merle Lehman wrote Norman Brown to ask for a new contract and more money than the NCPPC had originally offered. “This house cost me almost the figure I asked for and I dont see how I can sell for less as it is my life savings and to sell for less would just ruin me. As a fact thats all I have.”⁴³⁰

Some Reno-dwellers engaged real estate agents or attorneys to help them deal with the NCPPC; their communications reveal the economic and logistical hardships the NCPPC imposed on Reno’s working-class residents during the process of the neighborhood’s clearing. Martin and Agnes J. O’Leary engaged attorney John Sumner Wood to deal

⁴²⁸ Lewis Neill to Fred Coldren, September 9, 1929, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 47, A1-E18.

⁴²⁹ Lillie R. Hurley to G. L. Bunnell, December 2, 1935, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 46, A1-E18; May King to T.C. Jeffers, November 2, 1934, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 46, A1-E18.

⁴³⁰ Merle Lehman to Norman Brown, January 27, 1936, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 46, A1-E18.

with the NCPPC in negotiations regarding their home on Davenport Street. The O’Learys had five children, and their financial circumstances would not permit them to purchase a new home until they knew when they would receive the money for the house the NCPPC was taking from them. Seeming to forget his duty to his clients to secure the best price possible, Wood told NCPPC official Norman Brown that he would attempt to convince the O’Learys that the NCPPC’s price was reasonable, but predicted that Martin O’Leary “will be reluctant to accept my recommendation . . . after my fee is paid there is practically nothing left for him by way of net profit and in addition he has to look for another inexpensive home for his wife and five children which you realize is almost impossible.”⁴³¹

Several Reno property owners engaged the services of R. Marbury Stamp & Co., a local real estate corporation, in their dealings with the government. In December 1935, G. L. Bunnill, one of the company’s agents, wrote the NCPPC to plead his clients’ cases. Bunnill’s clients included the Aebersolds, an elderly couple in their late sixties; the Kings, whom he described as “afflicted”; and the Lanes, a young couple with three children. These families, explained Bunnill, lived in a “very desirable neighborhood, adjacent to good schools” and “excellent surroundings,” but “by reason of their very moderate circumstances will be forced to seek living quarters in much less desirable sections.” Bunnill urged the NCPPC to “adequately compensate these people for the very real hardship they will have to suffer in the loss of their homes, as it is evident they have put their life’s savings into them.”⁴³²

Whatever tactic they took in dealing with the NCPPC, few Reno-dwellers sold for prices that they believed represented fair value in return for the land the NCPPC was taking from them. May King, whose husband John had died by the time she sold her home in March 1936, had sought \$6,000 for her house but only received \$4,500 from the commission.⁴³³ The value Martin and Agnes O’Leary assigned to their house is not clear from the surviving documents, but it is obvious that they had sought more than the \$4,500 they

⁴³¹ Quotation appears in John Sumner Wood to Norman Brown, Jan. 24, 1936, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18. See also, John Sumner Wood to T.S. Settle, April 17, 1936, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.

⁴³² G. L. Bunnill to National Capital Park and Planning Commission, December 6, 1935, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.

⁴³³ May King, Land Purchase Contract for Lot 39, Square 1763, March 17, 1936, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 46, A1-E18; Lillie R. Hurley to G. L. Bunnill, December 2, 1935, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 46, A1-E18.

eventually received.⁴³⁴ Another of G. L. Bunnill’s clients, J. B. Lane, did not believe he had received adequate compensation from the commission either, and he sent a remarkable letter to the NCPPC along with the contract for the purchase of his home. Lane requested that Land Purchasing Officer Norman Brown tear up the contract, and “recomend to the Court to revise the commissions price.” “Mr. Brown this is hard to take,” he continued, “my money comes hard.” Lane drove a milk delivery truck, which meant getting up “at twelve o’clock at night, and plow through snow knee deep and sub. zero weather, such as we had this winter.” He took issue with the commission’s price relative to that afforded his neighbors: “It dont seem just, that my house should be priced with the others. If you was in my place you would feel the same.”⁴³⁵ The NCPPC used strong-arm tactics on white and Black residents of Reno alike—the O’Learys, Kings, and Lanes were all white, but they sold for prices they considered unfair and began the search for new homes alongside their Black neighbors.

Not all Reno property holders, it seems, felt they had received unfair compensation for their homes. Longtime RCA secretary Margaret Bates Torrence wrote to Harold Doyle, who seems to have helped her negotiate her deal, in February 1936 to tell him that the \$3,250 she had received for her property and home at 3900 Ellicott Street was “satisfactory.” Even those who did not feel they had been cheated monetarily were suddenly in need of a new home and perhaps without the means or ability to find one quickly. Torrence sought Doyle’s help in convincing the government to let her stay until the spring: “I am a widow and have not planned any place to go,” she explained, and requested that she be allowed to remain in her home “until warm weather in May or June,” asking Doyle to “fix it up with the government.”⁴³⁶ Fred and Sarah Green’s daughter, Esther Irene (who had married James L. Warren), sold her home on Dennison Place in 1941, and she too betrayed anxieties about how she would handle upcoming cold weather. “Please let me know just what has been done toward making a settlement that I may get settled before winter,” she

⁴³⁴ John Sumner Wood to Norman Brown, Jan. 24, 1936, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18; Martin J. O’Leary and Agnes O’Leary, Land Purchase Contract for Lot 38, Square 1763, February 17, 1936, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.

⁴³⁵ J. B. Lane to Norman Brown, March 16, 1936, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.

⁴³⁶ Quotation appears in Margaret H. Bates to Harold Doyle, February 14, 1936, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 47, A1-E18. See also Margaret Torrence, Land Purchase Contract, January 27, 1936, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 47, A1-E18.

instructed Norman Brown in October of that year.⁴³⁷ Being forced to part with a home of many decades surely carried a substantial emotional toll, but moving also presented a logistical challenge, especially for elderly residents or those without family members to assist them.



Figure 17: Home of Margaret Bates Torrence, RCA Secretary, circa 1930s.
(Courtesy of National Archives, NAID 17368312)

⁴³⁷ Quotation appears in Esther Warren to Norman Brown, October 20, 1941, Land Purchase Contract, January 27, 1936, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 47, A1-E18. See also Esther Irene Warren, Land Purchase Contract, August 15, 1941, Esther Irene Warren, Land Purchase Contract, August 15, 1941.

T.S.D.

NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION
Room 1621 - Navy Building
WASHINGTON, D. C.

LAND PURCHASE CONTRACT

I hereby agree to sell, and to convey by deed of General Warranty to United States of America, fee simple title to the following described property located in the District of Columbia, namely:

Lots 801 and 803
Square 1761

for the sum of Thirty Two Hundred Fifty and no/100 - - - - -

Dollars, (\$ 3,250.00) all cash, as soon as an abstract and certificate of title of said property can be obtained from a title company acceptable to the United States showing the title to be good and free from all encumbrances and liens; all expenses of Examination of Title, and of preparation, execution and recording of deed to the United States to be paid by the United States; all taxes, water tax and special assessments to date of transfer to be paid by me; title to be good, free of all encumbrances and liens, and possession surrendered at date of transfer, and adjustment of rents on any existing leases to be made to that date.

WITNESS my hand and seal this 27th day of January, 1936.

WITNESSES:

Leroy A. Brown Margaret A. Bates (Seal)
(Margaret A. Torrence)
J. C. Kent (Seal)

ACCEPTED, subject to the approval of the President.

NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION

By Arno B. Cammerer
Arno B. Cammerer, Executive Officer

This 6 day of February, 1936.

Norman B. Braun
Associate Land Purchasing
Officer

Figure 18: Land Purchase Contract signed by Margaret Bates Torrence, 1936.
(Courtesy of National Archives, NAID 17368312)

During the late 1920s and across the 1930s, the NCPPC's campaign to convert the Reno neighborhood proceeded apace, and the commission's yearly reports kept the public abreast of the project's progress. In 1930, the NCPPC declared that "Purchases were

continued in the Fort Reno area where a recreation center is proposed and where the school authorities this year acquired a considerable tract.” What to Reno’s residents and their allies seemed a conspiracy to rob them of their homes and land, the NCPPC portrayed as a model of interorganizational cooperation, billing the land already acquired as “an example of cooperative action by school, water, and park authorities to secure a single public open space.”⁴³⁸ After the purchase of Mount Asbury Church in October 1936, which he referred to as a “colored church and parsonage,” Norman Brown could report that the commission had been “successful in securing a contract at acceptable prices on every property except one.” By this point, both Alice Deal Middle School, which opened its doors in 1930, and Woodrow Wilson High School, which followed suit in 1935, were in operation, and Reno’s conversion was in full swing. According to Brown’s figures, the commission had purchased thirty-five houses situated on fifty-one lots and an additional twenty-five unimproved lots.⁴³⁹ Of course, this 1936 purchase did not mark the end of the commission’s efforts in Reno. The NCPPC continued to purchase land in Reno well into the following decade, its ambitions apparently grown, and pressure to clear out remaining Black property holders having continued unabated.

Reno’s residents had their say concerning the racist motivations behind the movement to clear Reno in the 1920s, and few residents who communicated directly with the NCPPC from 1930 seem to have protested on this score. But one perusing the Land Acquisition Files pertaining to Reno at the National Archives will find plenty of evidence that Reno-dwellers felt they were not getting fair value for their homes and land. Not everyone spoke as bluntly as J. B. Lane, but the sense that they were being squeezed or, to use Thomas A. Johnson’s phrase, “held up” by the government, was pervasive. Indeed, when three Black former residents of Reno spoke decades later about Reno’s clearing, they recalled not the racial animus that had motivated it but the feeling that they had not received fair value for their property. “It was a matter of offering little, what was a little bit of money for what they had,” remembered Mary Daniel, who had lived in Reno for decades. “Either that or we will condemn your property.” Asked if she felt Reno’s residents had received enough money to allow them to buy comparable housing elsewhere, Daniel seemed shocked that there might be some question on the matter. “Heaven’s that’s the question you’re asking. Never.” Augusta Moore, another longtime Reno resident, added simply, “No.” Neither Daniel nor Moore elaborated on these statements, preferring to focus on people they had known in Reno and the physical layout of the neighborhood;

⁴³⁸ Annual Report, National Capital Park and Planning Commission 1930 (United States: Government Printing Office, Washington, 1930), 46, RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, General Records Records Concerning the National Capital Park and Planning Commission, 1923–1934, Box 13, Entry P 24

⁴³⁹ Norman Brown, “NCPPC Land Purchase Program: Progress Report: Reno Recreation Center,” November 18–19, 1936, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 46, A1-E18.

their ready, firm responses and decisions not to elaborate on the matter as they elaborated on so much else in their interview suggested the pain they still felt over Reno’s clearing, as well as their anger and frustration toward the white officials, businessmen and civic leaders who had taken their homes from them.⁴⁴⁰

The Ethnic Cleansing of Northwest Washington

During the 1930s Reno residents reluctantly accepted the fact of their neighborhood’s destruction and concentrated on securing the best price possible, and the racial dynamics of the clearing of Reno occasioned less comment than they had in the previous decade. But no one had forgotten that Reno was being cleared because white city officials, citizens’ association leaders, and developers wanted the land for their own purposes and felt that Black Washingtonians did not deserve to stay there. Indeed, in the same breath that he told Fred Coldren that he had accepted that the government would take his land, Lewis Neill referenced the racial dimension of the situation:

I do think the Government ought to give the poor Colored people a reasonable price for their humble homes, which has taken years of hard labor and sacrifice to acquire. Senator Copeland of New York, a member of the Senate District Committee, at a hearing of the Reno Site before the District Committee in 1926 said “I prefer houses to parks.” I hope the Government will carry out the spirit of the Senator’s statement and give us enough to replace our homes in another desirable section of the city.”⁴⁴¹

Local whites who wanted to expedite Reno’s clean-up likewise recognized the racial dynamics at play. In 1933, an A. D. Crumbaugh informed Morsell that he had recently assumed management duties for several “colored properties, abutting the Fort Reno project.” Crumbaugh hoped to interest the NCPPC in acquiring them as part of the Reno project, but suggested that, alternatively, the NCPPC might “take same over in connection with the clearing up of the slums of Washington, in this fine residential district, as this would clean out all of the colored properties, or so called slums, in the vicinity of Fort Reno, not already included in the Fort Reno project.”⁴⁴² In 1942, the NCPPC asked the Department of Justice (DOJ) to expedite condemnation cases involving Reno properties, and gave the following as

⁴⁴⁰ “Interview at Rock Creek Baptist Church, August 2, 1977.” Courtesy of Alcione Amos, Anacostia Community Museum. Original located at Washington DC Historical Society.

⁴⁴¹ Lewis Neill to Fred Coldren, September 9, 1929, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 47, A1-E18.

⁴⁴² A.D. Crumbaugh to H. Tudor Morsell, November 8, 1933, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.

one of its justifications: “To make it physically possible to demolish a number of slum and near slum houses and create usable recreation areas for the two white schools and white adults in the vicinity.” Washington remained a segregated city, and Black landowners were being forced out to make way for the needs of local whites for park and playground facilities, a matter of sufficient urgency in the minds of NCPPC officials that it justified speeding up the DOJ’s normal condemnation process.⁴⁴³ At an August 1940 NCPPC meeting, Norman Brown reported that the commission’s staff was “under constant pressure by the entire community in the vicinity of Fort Reno . . . to have taking lines expanded sufficiently to wipe out certain virtual slum properties now inhabited by negroes, immediately adjacent to two of the city’s new and finest schools.”⁴⁴⁴ Perhaps it was this constant pressure from local, and presumably white, residents that inspired the NCPPC to keep track of how many homes owned by African Americans remained to be purchased in the vicinity of Reno. In March 1947, at a regular meeting, commission officials discussed two frame houses, one occupied by its owner and another by an elderly Black couple who rented, which were “the last remaining homes occupied by colored and not owned by the United States in the Fort Reno project.” There were “still some other temporary colored occupants in the project area,” but, concluded a report on the topic, “we own the properties.”⁴⁴⁵ By 1950, the NCPPC had acquired most Black-owned land in the Reno vicinity, but Elizabeth Rounds, a public school teacher who lived on the 4800 block of 41st Street, wanted the commission to finish the job. Rounds wanted the NCPPC to clear “Ten dilapidated, tumble-down dwellings,” across the street from her house which constituted an “unsightly, unhealthy, blot on the landscape.” Only one of the houses was occupied, she told the NCPPC, “and that, by a colored family.”⁴⁴⁶ Local white residents understood that the clearing of Fort Reno had been racially motivated, and they appealed to the racial dimensions of the project when encouraging NCPPC officials to complete the task.

⁴⁴³ Extract from Minutes of the 173rd Meeting of the NCPPC, June 18–19, 1942, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 47, A1-E18.

⁴⁴⁴ Extract of Minutes of the 152nd Meeting of the National Capital Park and Planning Commission, held on Aug 1–2, 1940, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18. Commission officials had noted similar pressure to purchase “the unsightly colored development at the southeast end of the Fort Reno area across from Wilson High School,” two years earlier, though they did not specifically identify the source of that pressure. Given the wording of this statement, though, it seems fair to assume that the source of this pressure was local property holders. See, “Extract from Minutes of the 131st Meeting of the National Capital Parks and Planning Commission, September 29–30, 1938,” RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.

⁴⁴⁵ Extract from the Minutes of the 226th Meeting of the National Parks and Capital Planning Commission, March 20–21, 1947, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.

⁴⁴⁶ Elizabeth W. Rounds to National Capital Park and Planning Commission, RG 328, Records of the National Capital Planning Commission, Land Acquisition Records, Land Acquisition Case Files, 1924–1961, 500-10 Fort Reno Park, Box 44, A1-E18.



Figure 19: 1936 demolition of house on Emery Street. (in possession of National Park Service)

Evidence suggests that observers uninvolved in the acquisition process likewise understood the racial motivations behind Reno’s clearing. In 1938, an interviewer working for E. Franklin Frazier spoke with an unnamed white man who had worked at the Reno reservoir since 1910. “For the past 40 years,” according to this anonymous worker, “they had been trying to get the colored out,” and during the previous twenty years, “all kinds of efforts [had] been made.” At one point, he remembered, the CCLC—which had “tried every way to get the colored out”—had attempted to convince the government to purchase land from Black residents for resale to the CCLC, “But this was too raw a deal so it fell through.” Eventually, the scheme to repurpose Reno as a home for white educational and recreational facilities had provided a rationale for Reno’s clearing, and “soon [it would] be possible to have all the colored out of the region.” A relatively sympathetic witness to Reno’s clearing, the man observed that while the neighborhood’s destruction had boosted local land values, it was a “shame” that families who had lived in the area since the Civil War era “[had] to move after all these years.”⁴⁴⁷ Another interviewee, a Miss Hayse, belonged to a family that had settled on the land surrounding Battery Kemble (another

⁴⁴⁷ “Interview with white Resident Worker at the Reno Reservoir,” Folder 20, Research Projects, Negro Youth Study, Washington, DC, 131-111, Moorland Springarn Research Center, Howard University, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Manuscript Division.

Civil War-era outpost in the Northwest quadrant) and had attended church in Tenleytown since the 1880s.⁴⁴⁸ She still lived near Battery Kemble in an “Isolated Negro Community,” and she responded with a “burst of anger” when asked about the city’s plan to build a road through her neighborhood. She saw what was happening to her neighborhood in the same terms as the destruction of Reno and Black dwellings in Georgetown. “They have been trying in every way to get rid of the colored people. Now that they have built all these fine homes out here; just as they have done in Tevelytown [sic], in Georgetown and everywhere else. They don’t want us to be anywhere.”⁴⁴⁹ Robert Drury, despite the unsympathetic picture of Fort Reno that he painted when he was interviewed about the neighborhood in the 1970s, agreed. “I think it was probably a deliberate plan to close out that type of area. They didn’t really do anything with it. It’s just open land.”⁴⁵⁰

The National Committee on Segregation in the Nation’s Capital (NCSNC), founded in 1946 to bring nationwide attention to racial discrimination in Washington, concurred with these assessments.⁴⁵¹ “It is reported that the Deal Junior High School and half-a-dozen small parks in adjacent blocks unhoused hundreds of Negroes, and, significantly, made the Teneleyton [sic] section into a ‘desirable’ all-white neighborhood,” its report stated. Reno’s fate was part of a District-wide process that had seen “the old Negro settlements around the fort sites . . . gradually whittled down.” DC’s white population had once been “indifferent to the hilly fort regions because they were too far out of town,” but it had now “come to consider them highly desirable residential sections.” Whites’ interest in moving to sections like Reno had spurred white developers like Harold Doyle and his syndicate to buy up land in these spots and carve out new subdivisions for white residences. The NCSNC’s report identified numerous organizations as involved in this process of residential segregation, including white citizens’ associations and the WREB, and it singled out the NCPPC for blame. The NCPPC’s planned Fort Drive would “probably uproot the last of the fort site settlers,” some of whom had “lived there all their lives as their fathers and grandfathers did before them.” Even without assigning the NCPPC racist intentionality, the report noted that nearly all the “shrinking of Negro neighborhoods” caused by the building of roads,

⁴⁴⁸ This “Miss Hayse,” may have been Maria Hayse, who a 1906 *Evening Star* item identified as the “assistant church clerk” of Rock Creek Baptist. If it was not Maria Hayse, this Miss Hayse was likely a relative of Maria Hayse. See “Anniversary Services,” *Evening Star*, September 26, 1907.

⁴⁴⁹ “Isolated Negro Community—Interview with Miss Hayse, daughter of one of the first Negro Settlers around Fort Kimball,” Folder 20, Research Projects, Negro Youth Study, Washington, DC, 131-111, Moorland Springarn Research Center, Howard University, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Manuscript Division.

⁴⁵⁰ “Interview with Mr. Robert Drury, July 12, 1977,” 8.

⁴⁵¹ Wendell E. Pritchett, “A National Issue: Segregation in the District of Columbia and the Civil Rights Movement at Mid-Century,” *Georgetown Law Journal* 93 (2005), 1321.

parks, schools, and other public buildings had been done at the commission’s behest, and accurately noted that NCPPC officials were more concerned with the “technical problem of beautifying the city” than with the “welfare of the people affected by [their] plans.”⁴⁵²

The NCSNC’s report also detailed the trials and tribulations confronting Reno’s displaced Black residents as they searched for affordable homes comparable to the ones the NCPPC had forced them to sell. Black Washingtonians displaced from their old neighborhoods faced restrictive covenants that barred white property owners from selling to African Americans; these covenants might be broken through litigation or concerted effort, but doing so was a lengthy, expensive process. As a result, Black home buyers were often forced to buy in existing Black neighborhoods or the few spots in the District that developers had earmarked for sale to African Americans. Sellers in these neighborhoods, realizing the leverage they possessed over Black buyers who wanted to remain in the District but could only buy in certain areas, raised prices higher than the actual value of the land and homes they sold. Reno’s residents were thus forced from housing that they desired to keep, given less than they sought for their property, and left to navigate a real estate market whose prices were inflated by the kind of residential segregation that had led to their eviction from Reno in the first place.⁴⁵³

The leaders of the movement to preserve Reno had been aware of the challenges displaced Reno residents would face on the District housing market, and they had informed the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia about them back in 1926. James Neill had described the plight of Reno-dwellers in stark terms: “we are being pressed to the wall. If we are in a settlement and want to get in a better settlement, they won’t let us come. If we are to ourselves, they won’t let us stay there.” If forced to move, Reno residents would not be able to either build or purchase houses comparable to those they would be forced from, because of the artificially inflated costs they would face. “You can not . . . replace these homes by condemnation money that a jury will allow, when you take into consideration the cost.” RCA Vice President Thornton Lewis agreed: “We could not buy a chicken coop here in Washington for the amount of money [they would receive under condemnation].”⁴⁵⁴ Of course, many Reno-dwellers sold under threat of condemnation rather than gamble on the outcome of a condemnation jury’s verdict, but there is little evidence that Reno residents felt they had gotten fair value for their homes, and plenty of evidence that they felt they had been short changed.

⁴⁵² National Committee on Segregation in the Nation’s Capital, “Residential Segregation: Discriminatory Housing in the Nation’s Capital,” 1-B, Folder 2, Research Projects, Negro Youth Study, Washington, DC, 131-07, Moorland Springarn Research Center, Howard University, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Manuscript Division.

⁴⁵³ National Committee on Segregation in the Nation’s Capital, “Residential Segregation: Discriminatory Housing in the Nation’s Capital,” 1-B, Folder 2, Research Projects, Negro Youth Study, Washington, DC, 131-07, Moorland Springarn Research Center, Howard University, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Manuscript Division.

⁴⁵⁴ *Acquirement of Reno Subdivision*, 15, 18.

Reno had been a neighborhood inhabited by working-class Black men and women, and some working-class whites as well, a historic enclave that traced its roots back to the last decades of the nineteenth century. Its founders, many born as slaves, had settled down on patches of rural land to make homes for themselves, only to watch as the city grew up around them, conservative whites undermined their dearly won citizenship with disenfranchisement, and wealthy whites desirous of taking their land surrounded them. Reno was, in Thornton Lewis’ words, a community of “working men, well thought of” whose youngsters got into trouble now and again, but who were trying to “live out there and be quiet, law-abiding citizens.”⁴⁵⁵ In the twentieth century, Reno fell prey to the machinations of powerful white government officials and private citizens, and of white Washingtonians’ general desire to segregate District neighborhoods. In Washington, concluded the NCSNC, Black District-dwellers were the victims of white efforts to racially purify residential neighborhoods, just as were men and women of Chinese, Mexican, and Jewish descent, or “whatever minority group is of local interest,” in other major American cities. Unlike African Americans in other major cities like New York and Chicago, where migrations in the early decades of the twentieth century had created substantial Black populations capable of exercising electoral power, disenfranchised Black Washingtonians had no elected allies to call on as they faced the powerful forces taking them from their homes and hemming them into certain sections of the District. The NCSNC argued that the residential pattern prevailing in Washington, DC at mid-century augured “a grim prospect for the capital of the world’s leading democracy,” and Reno’s displaced residents surely agreed.⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵⁵ *Acquirement of Reno Subdivision*, 18.

⁴⁵⁶ National Committee on Segregation in the Nation’s Capital, ““Residential Segregation: Discriminatory Housing in the Nation’s Capital,” 1-B, Folder 2, Research Projects, Negro Youth Study, Washington, DC, 131-07, Moorland Springarn Research Center, Howard University, E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Manuscript Division.

CONCLUSION

When Evelyn Masterson and her neighbors were forced to leave 41st Street in the winter of 1973, their plight was city-wide news. Early in 1974, a Bernice Scoville Brown protested the removal of these last vestiges of Fort Reno's African American community. The eviction of Masterson and her neighbors was, Brown wrote, "Just another statistic in the master plan to make Washington once again predominantly a 'white city.'" Brown confessed, though, that while it "distresse[d]" some members of Washington's Black community that the Mastersons and their neighbors were being forced to move, "Few blacks in the city knew that there was a black enclave in the area off Wisconsin Avenue called Tenleytown."⁴⁵⁷

By the late twentieth century, it seems, Fort Reno had been largely forgotten, aside from stray newspaper articles. Where the neighborhood had once stood, there were now schools, parkland, and recreational facilities, and most physical traces of the Fort Reno community had disappeared. From time to time, though, issues of race and belonging surfaced in the area, harkening back to the racial tensions that had caused the neighborhood's destruction in the first place. The mid-1960s saw local white residents oppose the building of a community pool in Fort Reno Park out of their concern that the pool might attract Black families to the area. Mrs. Joseph L. Miller, the recreation chairperson for the Connecticut Avenue Citizens Association, which supported the building of the pool, tied Congressional reluctance to approve the funds for the project to testimony at a subcommittee hearing in which "persons who opposed the pool" had claimed it would "attract 'undesirable elements' to the community." In her comments to the *Washington Post*, Miller dispensed with euphemism. Referring to an "ugly whispering campaign" being conducted about the pool, Miller opined that, "It's shocking in the year 1965 that the racial issue has been raised in an attempt to block this project."⁴⁵⁸ Writing about the project the following year, *Post* columnist William Raspberry likewise tied opposition to the project to local whites' fears that the pool facility would attract Black families and children to "their moderately posh neighborhood." Despite the fact that thirty-three organizations representing 20,000 members supported the pool, Raspberry wrote, a much smaller group of opponents, "whose influence apparently outstrips their numbers," again killed the project in 1966. This group of opponents had circulated a petition that "steered clear of any specific racial allusion," but, according to pool supporter Mrs. Paul R. McClennon, all

⁴⁵⁷ Bernice Scoville Brown, "Black and White Real Estate," *Washington Post*, January 11, 1974.

⁴⁵⁸ "33 Groups Want Pool at Ft. Reno," *Washington Post*, June 28, 1965.

involved knew what the “real reasons” were: “[T]hey fear Negro youngsters from East of the Park would come here to swim.”⁴⁵⁹ Thirty years had passed since the height of the battle over Fort Reno, but local whites still jealously guarded the space as their own.

In recent years, local activists have called for city officials to change Wilson High School’s name, deeming it inappropriate to honor the president whose administration “created the ideal environment to destroy African American communities,” in the words of one name-change supporter. In a 2019 article published in the *Washington Post*, teacher Michele Bollinger explained that, during her two decades at the school, a vocal group of students had always called for the name to be changed. Student activists’ issues with Wilson stem from his support for segregationist policies to his role in creating an environment in Washington, DC that allowed for the destruction of Black communities like Fort Reno. Were the school—today the most diverse traditional school in Washington—to be renamed, some activists have suggested that it bear the names of Vincent Reed or Edna Burke Jackson, respectively the first Black principal and teacher at Wilson; others have suggested that it bear the name “Reno City,” to honor the Black neighborhood whose remains it borders.⁴⁶⁰

The RCA had once protested the showing of *Birth of a Nation* in District theaters; Woodrow Wilson’s scholarship on the Civil War and Reconstruction had inspired the film and its virulently racist take on the history of the era—some of its title cards quoted Wilson directly.⁴⁶¹ The fact that the suggestion has been made to remove Wilson’s name in favor of Reno City shows that Washingtonians’ awareness of Reno and its fate has increased dramatically since Bernice Scoville Brown confessed Black Washingtonians’ ignorance of the community’s existence in the early 1970s. It is the aim of the present study to not only increase the public’s knowledge concerning the Fort Reno neighborhood, but to offer suggestions for how physical and cultural resources related to the neighborhood might be utilized to further public engagement with the community’s history and the issues it raises.

In today’s Fort Reno Park, physical traces of the Fort Reno neighborhood (limited remnants of foundations and “patches of pavement”) remain visible.⁴⁶² In 1983, archeologist Louana Lackey conducted a survey of the area, but she found only a single object, a button, that she could definitively link to the former neighborhood. Subsequent archeological surveys have proved more fruitful.⁴⁶³ A 2001 archeological survey conducted by John Milner & Associates found numerous historical artifacts related to the Fort Reno

⁴⁵⁹ William Raspberry, “Influential Few Halt Fort Reno Pool Plans,” *Washington Post*, December 5, 1966.

⁴⁶⁰ “Pain of Segregation Renewed at Wilson High,” *Washington Post*, March 11, 2019.

⁴⁶¹ Mark Benbow, “Birth of a Quotation: Woodrow Wilson and ‘Like Writing History with Lightning,’” *Journal of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era* 9, no. 4 (October 2010), 517–518.

⁴⁶² Flanagan, “Battle of Fort Reno.”

⁴⁶³ Lackey, “A Preliminary Archaeological and Historical Survey,” 23–24.

community that dated to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though the Milner team uncovered nothing from the Civil War period. The Milner survey also turned up structural features, such as concrete pads and “possible curbs,” as well as “[i]ntact yard surfaces” and other remnants “representing African American and Euro-American families living in Reno City.”⁴⁶⁴ A more recent study, conducted by WSP USA Solutions Inc. (WSP) in 2019, likewise found that the modern-day park “contains remains of a multi-ethnic community called Reno City or Fort Reno that stood here between 1870 and 1950.” In the report it produced, the WSP team explained that “many remains of Reno City are in the park,” including “[c]ellar holes, foundations, streets and probably other features,” as well as deposits of artifacts that “contain additional information that could contribute to the understanding of the post-Civil War and early-twentieth century development of a freed slave and multiethnic community.”⁴⁶⁵ Further scientific study of the remains of Reno that lie beneath the present-day park may tell us more about the daily lives of the men, women, and children who called Reno home for so many decades.

Although no homes from the Fort Reno subdivision remain, five structures contemporaneous with the Reno neighborhood still survive in the vicinity of the park. Three are duplexes on Nebraska Avenue, and a fourth is a brick building from the 1930s standing at the corner of Chesapeake and 41st Streets. The fifth is the Jesse Lee Reno School, which has been recently renovated.⁴⁶⁶ The Reno School closed its doors in 1950, and afterward it was used as a Civil Defense Office and a school for students with special needs; for many years, it simply lay vacant and suffered significant vandalization. The Reno School was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2010 and, four years later, it was renovated and connected to nearby Alice Deal Middle School. Today, the Reno School serves hundreds of students and holds multiple classrooms. There is some degree of continuity with the historic space, as the floor plan of the renovated school room was designed to match the building’s original plan. School officials have shown interest in using the Reno School to teach students about the history of Tenleytown and Fort Reno, as the walls of the renovated building are decorated with panels containing a timeline, photographs, and information about local history. The Tenleytown Historical Society also mounted an exhibit on Fort Reno in this space. As a piece of Fort Reno still standing decades after the

⁴⁶⁴ WSP USA, Inc., “Phase I Archeological Survey and Phase II Testing of the APE of Propose Trail Improvements at Fort Reno, Rock Creek Park,” Washington, DC, August 28, 2020, 44, 47. Courtesy of National Park Service.

⁴⁶⁵ WSP USA, Inc., “Phase I Archeological Survey and Phase II Testing of the APE of Propose Trail Improvements at Fort Reno, Rock Creek Park,” Washington, DC, August 28, 2020, 78-79. Courtesy of National Park Service.

⁴⁶⁶ Flanagan, “Battle of Fort Reno.”

neighborhood it originally served was destroyed, the Reno School can play an important role in efforts to interpret history of the area and serve as a forum for presenting new research related to Fort Reno.⁴⁶⁷



Figure 20: Present-day image of fire hydrant in Fort Reno Park. (Image taken by author, July 18, 2021)

Some of the only other remaining physical reminders of the neighborhood are four fire hydrants located in today's Fort Reno Park. Their seemingly incongruous location has intrigued visitors to the park over the years. In the early 1980s, American University graduate student Neil Heyden credited a fire hydrant with piquing his interest in Reno, provoking him to learn about the neighborhood that it had once served.⁴⁶⁸ In 2019, two students at Georgetown University, Matthew Barak and Leigh Bianchi, completed a research project focused on Fort Reno, and they likewise highlighted a fire hydrant and the questions it

⁴⁶⁷ Ella Feldman, "Alice Deal Middle Renovated Historic Landmark," *The Beacon*, July 28, 2015, accessed May 10, 2020, <https://thewilsonbeacon.com/5865/news/alice-deal-middle-school-renovates-historic-landmark/>; "Department of General Services: Reno School Project," *DC.gov*, accessed May 10, 2020, <https://dgs.dc.gov/page/dgs-reno-school-modernization-project>; "Jesse Reno School," *DC Historic Sites*, accessed May 10, 2020, <https://historicsites.dcpreservation.org/items/show/907>.

⁴⁶⁸ Heyden, "The Fort Reno Community," ii.

inspired the park's visitors to ask: "Unexplained and unmarked, a fire hydrant sits perched on the grassy incline of the field. *But how did it get there, and why?*"⁴⁶⁹ Besides the Reno School, these fire hydrants serve as the most visible physical reminders of the Fort Reno community, and they can play a pivotal role for historical interpreters in sparking conversations involving the neighborhood and its history. A walking tour of the park and its surroundings might highlight these fire hydrants, the Reno School, and even the structures on the surrounding blocks with ties to the Fort Reno neighborhood, as a reminder that community membership was open to those who lived outside the boundaries of the subdivision.

Rock Creek Baptist Church, for so many years a pillar of the Fort Reno community, still exists as well, although today it is in Prince George's County, Maryland, in the township of Upper Marlboro. After it was forced out of Fort Reno in 1941, the congregation first moved to Foggy Bottom, and then relocated again in 1956, to 8th and Upshur in Washington's Petworth neighborhood. In recent decades, however, it became clear to church leadership that "there was no way [for the church] to grow" at that location, citing problems with parking and opposition from local officials. In a depressing reenactment of Rock Creek Baptist's first move, the house of worship at 8th and Upshur has been demolished to make way for four expensive new row homes. Today, Rock Creek Baptist is located on Woodyard Road in Upper Marlboro and runs a day school in addition to its religious activities.⁴⁷⁰ One intriguing question is whether the church holds any records related to its time in Fort Reno. It is certainly conceivable, given the clear ties between the Reno Citizens Association and Rock Creek Baptist's congregation, that it holds RCA records. Even if this is not the case, any records it does hold that date to the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries would be of invaluable help to researchers. Efforts to investigate the potential existence of any such records as part of the current study proved unsuccessful.

The documentary record provides a more tangible link to the Fort Reno neighborhood than do its physical remains. The process of clearing Reno created a significant paper trail, and this project has used records from the NCPPC and the District Court system related to the clearing of Reno. In particular, the NCPPC kept a file on each Reno property owner it dealt with from the 1920s through the early 1950s, and these records provide great insight into the process of negotiation that accompanied the clearing of Reno, as well as the hardships that Reno residents experienced as they were forced to sell and find new homes elsewhere. A handful of properties within the Reno subdivision entered condemnation proceedings as well, and records of these cases provide valuable information, if they are

⁴⁶⁹ "Fort Reno: Growth and Displacement," January 14, 2020, accessed May 10, 2020, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/e400085dbcf54a9aa0fc13c6fa541f87>.

⁴⁷⁰ Hamil R. Harris, "DC Church Makes Long-Awaited Move But Leaves City," *Washington Informer*, January 14, 2017, accessed May 10, 2020 <https://www.washingtoninformer.com/d-c-church-makes-long-awaited-move-but-leaves-city/>.

less revealing about the everyday life of the Reno community on which much of the present study focuses. Goings-on in and around Reno frequently made their way into District newspapers, which have been a key resource used by this study. Contemporary newspaper databases have enabled the author of this study to locate hundreds of articles related to the neighborhood and its residents, but it is clear that more exist. One complication for researchers is that happenings in Reno often appeared in community reports on Tenleytown and Georgetown. Additionally, local reporters used multiple names to refer to the community over the years, including Fort Reno, Reno City, Fort Reno City, Reno Hill, Mount Reno, Reno heights, Reno subdivision, and Reno section; at least one newspaper report referred to the community as “Prospect Hill.”⁴⁷¹ The current study has located many articles focused on the neighborhood and its inhabitants, but there are surely additional items that have not yet been located, which can shed further light on community life in Fort Reno. Additional research into Union Army and other federal records from the Civil War period may shed light on the presence of African American laborers in and around Fort Reno during the wartime period, and perhaps prove that Black laborers did construct a makeshift settlement near the fort that served as the nucleus of the Fort Reno community.



Figure 21: Present-day image of Fort Reno School. (Image taken by author, July 18, 2021)

Fort Reno is a community that has vanished, replaced by a school, athletic fields, and parkland. Engagement with the Wilson High School and Alice Deal Middle School communities is one way to further interest in the neighborhood and its history; students and faculty from both schools have demonstrated their interest in Fort Reno and its inhabitants, and future projects between Fort Reno Park and constituencies from these schools

⁴⁷¹ “Man and Woman in a Lively Scrap,” *Evening Star*, March 13, 1899.

offer possible avenues for exploring Reno's history and presenting it to the public. It may be, too, that, given the difficulty of recounting the history of a community whose physical presence has largely been destroyed, National Park Service officials will need to think about interpreting its history in non-traditional ways, through activities and partnerships that would typically lie outside the bounds of historical interpretation. For instance, Fort Reno had a Black baseball team in the early years of the twentieth century; today, one of the athletic facilities that occupies Fort Reno Park is a baseball field. An event focused on the cultural life of Fort Reno might be held on the baseball field and feature a reenactment of an early-twentieth century game of baseball, complete with period-appropriate dress, equipment, and rules. The long-running concert series at Fort Reno might provide another way to engage the public with the neighborhood's history. Park officials might be able to craft an event that connects the modern-day concerts with the musical performances frequently sponsored by the RCA. Many of the bands featured in the concert series over the years, such as Fugazi, have engaged with social and political issues relevant to Reno and its history, and the opportunity to create a partnership that uses the concert series to bring greater attention to the neighborhood and its history seems like a potentially fruitful avenue for exploration. Given the lack of physical remnants of the Fort Reno community, historical interpretation may need to be more "event-focused" than it would otherwise be.

In Fort Reno Park, there is a disconnect between the beauty of the surroundings, the productive uses to which the park is put, and the fact that this beauty and productivity came as a result of the destruction of a community. Alice Deal Middle School and Wilson High School continue to serve the Tenleytown community, and local residents having access to baseball fields and tennis courts, as well as a free concert series, is certainly a benefit. But we must remember that today's park came at a price. As Irina Cortez wrote in her 2003 study of Fort Reno:

Tenleytown acquired a beautiful new park and new schools, but the cost of all of this was the destruction of an entire community of people with hopes and dreams for themselves and their children. There is no way of knowing what information and history was lost with the demolition of the subdivision. The people who left Reno took their heritage with them and probably struggled to hold on to it in a world that must have seemed terribly unjust. Their world—a legacy of nearly 70 years—was destroyed within the span of a score of years and the government not only allowed it, but also actively participated in it.⁴⁷²

⁴⁷² Cortez, "History of an Age," 30.

In her history of Tenleystown, Judith Beck Helm likewise grappled with the present-day beauty of Fort Reno Park and the destruction of community that had been necessary for the park to exist. “It is pleasant to walk around the large area of land that was once the Reno community,” she wrote,

to be above and away from the traffic of Nebraska or Wisconsin Avenues, to walk across the hilly fields of grass and hear the wind blow through the trees; it is exhilarating to be able to see for miles during the day, or to be able to see all the stars at night. The Fort Reno Park is enjoyed by a great variety of people. But it must be remembered at what price this enjoyment was bought.⁴⁷³

No amount of historical scholarship or interpretation can undo the damage done by the destruction of Fort Reno. However, the author’s hope is that this study can provide a fuller accounting of Fort Reno’s history than has previously existed and serve as a springboard for increased interpretation of and engagement with the physical and documentary traces of the Fort Reno neighborhood. The community that Thornton and Lucy Lewis, Zachariah T. Thomas, Samuel and Clara Hebron, Fred and Sarah Jane Green, Airy Ann and George Dover, Amy Cousins, John F. and Annie B. Scott, and Esther Irene and James L. Warren, among so many others, called home is gone, but its memory lives on, and engagement with its history can foster productive present-day conversations about race, place, and space.



Figure 22: Present-day image of Fort Reno Park. (Image taken by author, July 18, 2021)

⁴⁷³ Helm, *Tenleystown*, 488.

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